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Pan-Africanism in the Age of Obama: Challenges and Prospects

by Paul Tiyambe Zeleza

Memories of President Obama’s election and inauguration, which electrified the American, world, and pan-African imaginations approximately two years ago have almost faded under the harsh demands of governance, in the face of Washington’s descent into political gridlock verging on ungovernability. The euphoria that temporarily lifted the country from the abyss of collective despondency has dissipated as the Great Recession continues to devastate lives and livelihoods and mock the fantasies of indebted consumption of the American dream. The increasingly embattled Obama administration finds itself buffeted between the angry Tea Party rabble on the right and the impatient progressives of the left. In the meantime, African American leaders are beginning to question the president’s commitment to a “black agenda” more openly.

Elsewhere in the world, the giddy promises of the Obama era have largely lost their glow as the reflexes of American imperial power reassert themselves amidst the recycled rhetoric of multilateralism. And in the pan-African world, from the continent itself to Afro-Latin America to Afro-Europe and Afro-Asia, the great expectations for a new dispensation for African peoples remain suspended in hope and uncertainty. The romance with Obama, which began to lose its seductions in Cairo, frayed in Accra and fizzled in Copenhagen.

These inchoate discontents say more about the desperate desires pinned on an Obama presidency than the actual performance of his administration. They are rooted in the great expectations for meaningful change after the disastrous years of the Bush administration and the destructive legacies of neo-liberal fundamentalism that imploded in the Great Recession. Obama has never presented himself as a fiery radical committed to profound social transformation. In the spectrum of American politics he is a liberal centrist. In pan-African politics he would be regarded as a cautious reformist, not a radical or revolutionary.

It is remarkable how soon some people seem to want to forget President Obama’s horrible inheritance. To quote from a blog essay I wrote on January 20, 2009:

The extraordinary euphoria that has gripped this nation and parts of the world is obviously unsustainable, and it will inevitably evaporate in the predictable whirlwind of stumbles, setbacks, even scandals, not to mention the structural obstacles, the systemic imperatives of this mighty but beleaguered capitalist country and imperial power that will constrain bold changes, truly progressive transformation. The challenges are immense indeed: ending two foreign wars in Iraq and Afghanistan that have depleted the nation of treasure and trust and abandoning the misguided commitment to “war on terror” which even Britain one of America’s staunchest allies thinks is a mistake; managing the economic crisis and administering an effective stimulus package that will halt the economic recession and restore growth; expanding access to health care and improving the quality of education and overcoming the inequities of the prison industrial complex that has devastated African American and other minority communities; pursuing sound and sustainable domestic and global environmental policies; and promoting smart foreign policies and allegiance to multilateralism. The biggest
challenge facing President Obama is how to manage the relative historic decline of American global supremacy in a world of new emerging powers and growing intolerance against authoritarianism whether within or between nations; in short, a more global and nationalistic world impatient with the old injustices and hierarchies of power and well-being and hungry for development, democracy, and self-determination.

Much could be said about the unfolding dynamics of the Obama administration, but a lot of the prognostications are premature because the Obama era is only a few years old. Like most historical eras, it arises out of complex and contradictory national and global histories, and its trajectory will be no less complex and contradictory, even messy and bewildering.

I would like to refocus analysis by examining the Obama era more directly in the context of pan-Africanism. What does this moment mean, substantively and symbolically, for the pan-African world? What are its challenges and prospects? My presentation is in three parts. First, I will briefly discuss the history of pan-Africanism. This is of course predictable coming from a historian. There is great value in historical reflections in so far as they help lift our gaze from the immediacy of the present, the intensity of daily news. With a longer historical view we can begin to tease out the real import of the age of Obama. Second, I will examine the shifting engagements between Africa and its diasporas and what the Obama era might portend. Finally, I will return to look at the implications of the Obama era for Africa.

Pan-African Journeys

It is not a mystery why the presidential candidacy, victory, inauguration, and now administration of Barack Hussein Obama II, enchanted and energized the pan-African world. The reasons for this are rooted in deep collective anxieties and aspirations, the interwoven memories of racialized subjugation, the enduring yearnings for historical and humanistic redemption from the barbarities and banalities of Euroamerican domination. Obama is the latest torchbearer in the protracted struggles for emancipation and empowerment for African peoples, whose baton was inherited from many others in the pan-African pantheon from Sojourner Truth to Martin Luther King, Nzinga Mbande to Nelson Mandela.

Pan-Africanism was born and bred in the diaspora where the collective racialized subjugation and the consciousness of African-ness first developed. This burgeoning transnational identity, as an object of terror and derision on the one hand and the basis of struggle and agency on the other spread along the major centers of the old triangular slave trade in the Atlantic world. Originally an elitist movement, it gradually found anchoring in the mass anti-colonial and civil rights movements of the post-Second World War era and was eventually institutionalized in post-independence regional integration schemes in Africa and the Caribbean and state actors’ interventions in the post-civil rights societies of the Americas where the African diaspora populations are minorities.

As pan-Africanism became more regionalized and nationalized and acquired state power or influence in the 1960s, it lost its transatlantic and global reach and revolutionary ambitions. Its primary thrust also shifted from struggles for cultural and political citizenship to struggles for social and economic empowerment, from humanistic to developmentalist discourses, from a preoccupation with the civilizational presence of Africa and its diasporas in the world concert of cultures to their geopolitical standing in the polarized world of the Cold War.

During its long and turbulent history over the course of the 20th century, pan-Africanism encompassed various political, cultural, and intellectual movements based on a series of shared presumptions and objectives. On the one hand, it sought to liberate Africans and the African diaspora from racial degradation, political oppression, and economic exploitation, and on the other to promote unity and solidarity among African peoples in political, cultural, and economic matters. Needless to say, pan-Africanism incorporated ideas derived from the experiences of and struggles against slavery, colonialism and racism, as well the ideas
of democracy, Marxism and socialism, and nationalism from various parts of the imperial and colonized worlds. In due course, at least six versions or imaginaries of pan-Africanism developed: Transatlantic, Black Atlantic, continental, sub-Saharan, pan-Arab, and global.

Proponents of the first imagined a pan-African world linking continental Africa and its diaspora in the Americas. The second version confined itself to the African diasporic communities in the Americas and Europe, excluding continental Africa, as articulated in Paul Gilroy’s book *The Black Atlantic*, in which the cultural creativity and connections of the African diaspora in the US and Britain are celebrated, while continental Africa is largely ignored (and so is Afro-Latin America). The third focused primarily on the unification of continental Africa. The fourth and fifth restricted themselves to the peoples of the continent north and south of the Sahara, and in the case of Pan-Arabism, extended itself to western Asia or the so-called Middle East. The sixth seeks to reclaim the connections of African peoples dispersed to all corners of the globe.

Thus almost from the very beginning there were different articulations of pan-Africanism as an imaginary of the perils and possibilities of the African condition on the continent and in the diaspora. The solidarities and schisms encompassed the different spatial and social geographies of Africa and the diaspora, between the imperial divisions of Anglophone, Francophone, and the Lusophone worlds, between elite and mass expressions, national and transnational commitments, ethical and epistemic imperatives, radical and reformist projects. These dynamics manifested themselves at every moment, region and even country as evident in the contestations between the Du Boisian Congresses and Garveyite Conventions in the US in which elitist and populist invocations, and socialist and capitalist ideologies vied for supremacy.

Each version of pan-Africanism, as a discourse or a movement, developed at a different time, in a different way, in different locations. For example, while transatlantic pan-Africanism developed as a movement of ideas, with little formal organization apart from periodic conferences, and predated, indeed, spawned continental pan-Africanism, it was the latter which first found institutional fulfillment with the formation of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) in 1963. The connections and reverberations between these pan-Africanisms were, and continue to be, intricate, complex, and contradictory, spawning both narrow territorial nationalisms and broad transnational movements, including dozens of regional integration schemes. Pan-African movements were often complimented and constrained by other transnational movements, those organized around religion, for example, or colonial linguistic affiliations.

The age of Obama, I would like to argue, holds the potential of refocusing pan-Africanism, bringing together many of its strands and tendencies into a new postcolonial pan-Africanism fit for the 21st century. Obama’s rise signifies a pan-African present in which the continent and the diaspora are mutually inscribed, that invokes memories of the past and imaginations of the future that are diverse and inseparable. Obama was incubated, physically and politically, in the whirlwind of African decolonization and the American civil rights movement. The Obama phenomenon reveals the potential of not only contemporary transatlantic pan-Africanism borne out of struggles for civil rights in America and independence in Africa, but of forging a new global pan-Africanism as borne by his initial electric appeal among African diasporas in Europe and Asia and the interest of the African Union to forge a new compact between the continent and its diasporas globally.

The AU has designated the diaspora as Africa’s sixth region and allocated it representation in the Economic and Social Council. The formation of the African Union ushered in a new phase in Africa’s long search for continental integration and unity with the diaspora. Notwithstanding its structural weaknesses and idealistic ambitions the AU is a much more robust organization than its predecessor, more committed to the pursuit of development, democracy,
and human rights than the OAU which was preoccupied with the politics of decolonization, national sovereignty, and presidential camaraderie.

The OAU's pan-Africanism represented the triumph of continental integration over transatlantic solidarity, while the AU gestures, tentatively so far, towards a global pan-Africanism for the 21st century that could create a new compact between Africa and its diasporas. The conceptual and concrete challenges of pursuing this project are immense indeed in so far as people of African descent are spread in various regions of the world, experience different degrees of sovereignty and marginalization, and encompass historic, contemporary, and overlapping diasporas.

It is not yet clear how the diaspora will be mainstreamed in the activities of the AU. Indeed, some argue of greater importance than the integration of the diaspora in African state and regional institutional structures is the need to strengthen connections and communication between Africa and its diasporas among the ordinary people. I don’t think the two are mutually exclusive. The incorporation of the diaspora in the AU’s pan-African project represents a return to the future in so far as the very notions of African unity and integration, the inspiration behind the enduring dreams of pan-Africanism, are derived from the diaspora arising out of their homogenization and racialization in the lands of their dispersal.

Obama’s multiple racial, religious, cultural, spatial, and social identities and affiliations make him the quintessential subject and sign, signifier and signified of a 21st century transnational African consciousness and solidarity. His actions and inactions as a candidate, and now president, have triggered widespread debates about the threads that connect and separate Africa and its diasporas, the dialogues and dissensions between the continent and its diasporas and within the diaspora itself. This explains the transcendental appeal among peoples of African descent from Kenya to Kansas, Brazil to Britain, Iraq to India, their huge investment in the historical and humanistic possibilities of the Obama era, and impatience with the structural constraints and political compromises of the Obama presidency. He symbolizes their longings to overcome the marginalities of the color line of the 20th century, so memorably lamented by W.E.B. Du Bois, with universal enfranchisement entailed by the transformations of global power in the 21st century.

The Obama phenomenon forces us to examine the engagements between Africa and its diaspora more seriously than we have tended to. Homelands and diasporas often serve as signifiers for each other, and this is increasingly the case for Africa as a whole and individual African nations. This is one reason the Obama phenomenon is critical for pan-Africanism, as a measure and medium to examine the engagements between Africa and its diasporas including the overlapping diasporas in the US.

At home, in the US, Obama is a product of the very limited dispensations of the civil rights settlement the Republicans have worked so hard to overturn since the late 1960s. His candidacy and victory are simply unimaginable without the struggles of the civil rights movement, and the numerous movements before it going back to slavery. He embodied a moment of new possibilities for American citizenship and democracy. His victory marked a deeply emotional moment for African Americans, the second largest African diaspora population after Brazil, which was inconceivable to their ancestors who endured and struggled against the shackles of slavery and segregation, amazing even to the beneficiaries of civil rights often constrained by the bigotries and excuses of low expectations. His rise was a tribute to generations of struggles, African Americans’ unshakeable faith in their humanity, those eternal hopes that they could shift the trajectory of their nation’s original sin and cruel history.

In Africa, too, there was ecstasy from the Cape to Cairo that the son of a Kenyan had scaled to the highest office in the world’s sole superpower. For a continent traumatized by the terrors of slavery and colonialism, and the tyrannies of postcolonial misrule, Obama’s “audacity of hope” res-
onated deeply. Some harbored great expectations that Africa would finally have a supporter, or at the very least a sympathetic listener in the White House, that as a member of the African diaspora President Obama would pursue more enlightened foreign policies towards Africa than his predecessors.

But even in those heady days many informed Africans were more cautious, ambivalent or even skeptical. They wondered what the new president would bring to Africa beyond hope and pride. The limited structural transformations of postcolonial Africa and post-apartheid South Africa served as cautionary tales on the limits of racial substitution in the corridors of power. They pointed out Obama’s America would still be an empire, that as an American politician Obama would pursue American not African interests, and work under conditions that circumscribe his presidency in America’s divided government. And he would be so preoccupied with digging the US out of the appalling mess left by the Bush administration that he would have little time for Africa.

Diaspora Engagements

But even the skeptics celebrated Obama’s rise. They valued the inspiration he generated and understood that in politics symbols matter, that there are intersections between symbols and substance in so far as even symbolic change often emerges out of real struggles. The rise of Obama, just like the demise of colonialism and apartheid, whatever their subsequent limitations, were products of protracted struggles. It is in this sense that Obama is a powerful symbol for the pan-African world. He is a symbol of black cognitive and cultural capacities for so long dismissed and derided by whites. He serves as the signified and signifier of black citizenship and African globality, who projects a new image of the African arrival and presence in America. As the son of a transient Kenyan immigrant, not a descendant of the historic diaspora, Obama reconnects the old diaspora to Africa and vice-versa in more immediate, intimate, and innovative ways. His persona and trajectory simultaneously reaffirm and reconfigure pan-African connections, and shatter the insidious narratives of rupture proclaimed so loudly in Paul Gilroy’s Black Atlantic and Keith Richburg’s Out of America.

As is increasingly evident in recent research, the connections between Africa and its diasporas — both old and new — have been far deeper and more diverse and beneficial for African peoples on the continent and in the diaspora, certainly for the Atlantic world, than used to be generally acknowledged. The engagements have been cultural, ideological, iconographic, economic, demographic, and political in nature. The communication and circulation of cultural practices and paradigms, ideas and ideologies, images and identities between Africa and its diasporas have constituted an essential part of the modernities, globalization, transnationalism, and cosmopolitanism of both Africa and the diaspora. Since 2005 I have visited sixteen countries — four each in continental North and South America, the Caribbean, Europe and Asia — for a global project on African diasporas in which, besides mapping out the dispersals of African peoples in Asia, Europe, and the Americas, and comparing the processes of diaspora formation within and among these regions, I am trying to examine the ebbs and flows of linkages and exchanges between these diasporas and Africa over time.

The engagements have intensified with each new wave of demographic movement and the development of new information and communication technologies. This is certainly the case with economic engagements, as evident in remittances and investment from the new emigrés who currently remit $40-$150 billion, more than all so-called foreign “aid” to Africa combined. The economic linkages are tied in complex ways to demographic movements. There have been continuous flows of people between Africa and the rest of the world for millennia, going back to the migrations of modern humans out of Africa to populate the planet.

These movements, both free and forced, persisted. In more recent historical times, relevant for African diaspora history, they go back at least a thousand years for Asia and Europe and the last five centuries for the Americas. In recent decades, African global migrations have accelerated; the continent’s
total migrant population nearly doubled from 9.1 million in 1960 to 17.1 million in 2005. While the majority of Africa’s migrants went to other African countries, a growing number went to Western Europe, North America, and Western Asia. In 2005, the countries with the largest numbers of African-born residents outside of Africa were France, Saudi Arabia, the US, Spain, the UK and Italy, in that order.

New African migrations across the Atlantic, which had slowed after abolition of the slavery, steadily increased after the Second World War as the winds of decolonization began to blow across the continent, and accelerated after independence and especially during the disastrous years of structural adjustment. President Obama is part of this story, a member of the new African diaspora in a country—the US—and a region—the Atlantic—of “overlapping diasporas”: Diasporas constituted out of multiple geographies, histories, and voyages, new migrants from Africa, as well as Afro-Latin America and Afro-Europe and to a smaller extent Afro-Asia.

Barack Hussein Obama Sr. was among the first group of Kenyan students who came to the US in 1959 as part of the airlift program organized by the renowned Kenyan nationalist leader, Tom Mboya, and the newly formed African American Students Foundation supported by philanthropists including prominent African American donors. From 1960 the Kennedy Foundation lent its support following Mboya’s appeal to Sen. John F. Kennedy. The AASF provided scholarships to educate a new generation of professionals to run the postcolonial state. A year before Obama was born there were 35,355 African-born residents in the US and in 2007, when he announced his candidacy, there were 1.4 million. In reverse, people from the diaspora have gone to Africa on temporary sojourns or permanently as traders, students and scholars, political leaders and rebels, religious seers and proselytizers, and tourists.

The political engagements have been particularly crucial. As noted earlier, pan-Africanism was driven by liberatory and solidarity imperatives. The nationalists who led the movements for independence in Africa and the Caribbean and civil rights in the US almost invariably subscribed to some form of pan-Africanism, to the notion of a shared, collective racial identity, thanks to the over-determination of race in the colonial and diasporan worlds, their intricate institutional and ideological networks, and the transnational dimensions of their respective struggles. There were connections and reverberations between these movements: the nationalist achievements in Africa and the Caribbean inspired civil rights struggles in the US, while American civil rights activists provided crucial support to liberation movements fighting against recalcitrant settler regimes in Southern Africa by applying pressure on the American government and corporations.

Following the attainment of independence in Africa and civil rights in the diaspora, pan-Africanism faced serious challenges in terms of its material and moral anchoring as the new leaders turned inward to reap the fruits of their political victories at least for the political class. The rise of Obama to the American presidency might of course present little more than African America’s equivalent of African decolonization, which will be followed by disappointment; the not yet uhuru syndrome that postcolonial and postapartheid Africa is so familiar with. Already, the honeymoon has ended for President Obama among some African and African American radicals and progressives.

But just as decolonization was a product of protracted struggles and opened a new complicated and contradictory moment of continuing struggle for the enduring dreams of African nationalism—development, democracy, and self-determination—the ascendancy of President Obama is also an outcome of protracted struggles and opens a new chapter in the struggles of African Americans for the full rights and privileges of citizenship. In both cases, it shifts the terrain of struggle from the political to the economic, the cultural to the social. Clearly, besides enlarging the content of political citizenship and human rights, the pan-Africanism of the 21st century will increasingly be predicated on economic development and empowerment.
AN OBAMA is unthinkable in both contemporary Europe, where Afro-Europeans remain invisible in national histories, and Afro-Latin America, which attracts relatively few contemporary African migrants. Obama’s personal and political biographies symbolize the braided histories of the old and new diasporas in the US, the center of Africa’s “overlapping diasporas,” where the historic communities of African Americans, migrant communities from other diasporic locations, recent immigrants from both the indigenous and immigrant communities of Africa live side by side. Afro-Europe is largely constituted by 20th-century migrants from the Americas and continental Africa, Afro-Latin America remains the preserve of descendants of the enslaved transported from Africa and post-emancipation migrations from the Caribbean, while Afro-North America embodies the migrant traditions and trajectories of both. Nonetheless, Obama’s rise invigorates all these diasporas and challenges Europe and Latin America to look hard at their own histories and societies. It also expands the meaning of multicultural democracy at a global level as much as it does nationally with regard to the promises of the US Constitution and the meaning of US citizenship in the 21st century.

Each diaspora wave or group in the US tends to have its own connections and commitments to Africa, its own memories and imaginations of Africa, and its own conceptions of the diasporic condition and identity. This partly explains the heated debate about Obama’s blackness early in the campaign, which was less about Obama’s racial authenticity and more about the preeminence of the African American experience and political loyalty to the civil rights agenda. Also diverse and complex are the relations among these diasporic populations, which are structured by different contexts, constructs, and characters of engagement. By context, I refer to the social arenas in which the different diasporas interact; by constructs I mean the dynamics that mediate their interactions; and character involves the content and processes of interactions. The contexts are private, public, and the various intersections between them. The connec-
tions and disconnections among the different diasporas are conditioned by institutional, ideological, identity, and individual dynamics. As for content of the intra-diasporan engagements, they can be characterized by antagonism, ambivalence, acceptance, adaptation, and assimilation. Most likely, the Obama presidency will affect the dynamics of engagements among Africa's overlapping diasporas in the US, as well as between them and Africa, and with other diaspora locations. Obama's trajectory will serve as the pivot around which new diaspora identities and politics will coalesce and evolve.

African and the United States in the Obama Era

Undoubtedly, the Obama era represents an important milestone in African American political and cultural history, but it does not portend the arrival of a post-racial promised land any time soon despite the wishful dreams of the chattering classes. One electoral victory cannot overturn four centuries of African American racial exploitation and oppression. The real meaning, the hope of his presidency lies in the process, the struggles that brought it about. Obama was propelled by a diverse movement comprised of multitudes of activists fighting for health care, education, jobs, women's rights, gay rights, peace, the environment, and against poverty, militarism, mass incarceration, and other causes to create a more human society. Their dreams, indeed the dreams of the civil rights movement, of Martin Luther King and Ella Baker, remain deferred.

For Dr. King, as he so eloquently put it in his celebrated speech, “Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence,” delivered on April 4, 1967, at Riverside Church in New York City, racism, poverty, and war were intertwined, American imperialism abroad and racism at home reproduced each other. President Obama lacks Dr. King’s burning moral and political fervor to overhaul American society and politics; his drive is to run the country more efficiently. He also seems wedded to maintaining American power, albeit with softer gloves than the bare knuckled arrogance of the Bush administration. Clearly, President Obama owes much to the civil rights movement, but he does not consummate it. The battle to advance an alternative conception of American democracy and global power persists. The struggle continues indeed.

Similarly, it is clear that Obama’s presidency does not entail a fundamental restructuring of Africa-US relations. It is true Kenya and Africa loom large in Obama’s biography. One third of his first autobiography, Dreams from My Father, is set in Kenya, where his search for identity and recognition was realized; his years at Harvard Law School are shortshifted in two sentences. Obama first discovered his political voice and oratory as a college student involved the anti-apartheid campaign. Yet, in his second and more political autobiography, The Audacity of Hope, Africa peeps in as an embarrassing afterthought. He gives us the conventional pathological Africa of disease, poverty, corruption, dictatorships, and war that plunges him “into cynicism and despair,” he writes, until he is reminded that charity, western philanthropy, not trade and partnership, can go a long way to help this benighted continent of his father and numerous Kenyan relatives.

Many observers across the continent and the US wonder whether there will be any significant shifts in American foreign policies towards the continent beyond the traditional paradigm that sees Africa in humanitarian, not geostrategic terms, as a global pawn rather than as a global player, notwithstanding the polite rhetoric about Africa’s great potential, or the growing anxieties about China’s economic “invasion” of Africa, and the new found security preoccupations in which Africa is seen as a soft underbelly in the misguided “war on terror.”

In the last chapter in my book, written 11 days after President Obama’s inauguration, entitled “Waiting for the Obama Dividend: The Future of US Africa Relations,” I noted that during the campaign, the Obama team identified three policy objectives: to accelerate Africa’s integration into the global economy; to enhance the peace and security of African states; and to strengthen relationships with those African governments, institutions and civil society organizations com-
mitted to deepening democracy, accountability and reducing poverty. As laudable as these goals might be, the devil is in the details, in the implementation. The rhetoric is compromised by both the weight of history and the inherent contradictions of unequal power, the persistent incongruence of American and African interests.

The Obama administration would go a long way in transforming US-African relations if it adopted the following five-pronged agenda: First, it needs to abandon the growing militarization of its Africa policy spawned by the misguided "war on terror" and concretized by the formation of African Command (AFRICOM), which is widely opposed by African states and civil society groups. Militarism has been the bane of African politics and development and policies predicated on more militarization, whatever the justification, are counterproductive.

Second, the US should promote and effectively coordinate with regional African peacemaking initiatives. Failure to do so recently produced many strategic blunders including most recently in Somalia when local interests were subjugated to America’s blind ideological opposition to the largely moderate Islamist forces that had taken power and were consolidating their rule over this beleaguered country.

Third, backing rather than bucking progressive democratic regimes, experiments, and struggles will bring both Africa and the US long-term political dividends. The US has a sordid record of coddling autocracies and electoral malpractices when it suits its short-term and shortsighted interests. If it seeks to win friends and influence Africa’s peoples hungry for democracy the US must embark on sustained engagement with the continent’s democratic states and civil societies.

Fourth, the US should support Africa’s efforts for sustainable development, which have been undermined by the ideological regime of neo-liberalism that undid much of Africa’s post-independence development momentum. The Wall Street financial meltdown that triggered the global economic crisis confirmed the utter bankruptcy of neo-liberalism. The Obama administration offered a huge bailout for the American economy; at the very least, it should stop dissuading African governments from doing the same and support long-standing efforts to cancel Africa’s ill-gotten debts.

Finally, the US would assist Africa immeasurably if it backed the restructuring of institutions of global political and economic governance from the UN Security Council to that detested trinity, the World Bank, IMF, and the WTO. In this regard, the US needs to take leadership in environmental matters befitting its role as the world’s biggest polluter and consumer of global resources by, among other things, supporting international protocols and funding existing agreements for climate adaptation and mitigation among the developing countries and negotiating new and more robust arrangements to combat global warming and other environmental threats.

On all these fronts, the record of the Obama administration is, at best, still very much a work in progress. Elite African opinion is no longer as infatuated with President Obama as it once was. His two visits to the continent left much to be desired. Many were critical of the silences and styles of his Cairo and Accra speeches. In the first speech he failed to address the dismal human rights situation in Egypt and the lack of democracy among many of America’s friends in the Arab world. In the second he gave a rather paternalistic lecture on good governance and corruption without implicating western imperialism in Africa’s perennial challenges of underdevelopment and misrule. And many in Africa and the global South blamed the collapse of the 2009 Copenhagen Climate Change Conference on US intransigence, not China’s as the American and European press sought to portray it.

The challenge for Africa with the new Obama administration, as with any American administration and other major powers for that matter, will be, as always, for its leaders and thinkers to clearly articulate and fight for Africa’s fundamental interests cohered around the triple dreams of development, democracy, and self-determination. This entails a three-pronged strategy in Africa’s
dealing with the US: strengthening coordination within Africa itself so that the continent speaks with a more unified voice on critical global issues; promoting collaboration between Africa and the global South for more leverage in negotiations with the global North over international challenges from trade to security to the environment; and bolstering connections with the African diaspora as Africa’s eyes and ears in the streets and corridors of power in Euroamerica.

The African diasporas in the US and elsewhere in the global North have made critical contributions to Africa from the development of pan-Africanism by the historic diasporas, out of which the nationalist struggles for independence were spawned, to remittances by the new diasporas that currently constitute the largest inflows of “foreign aid” for many countries. The tentacles of the diasporas today are extensive, indeed, encompassing cultural and social institutions as well as political and civil society organizations, and they extend from classrooms to Congress, the pulpit to the presidency. Africa and the diaspora need to mobilize each other for their mutual benefit under President Obama, the first African diasporan leader of this powerful country, and make his administration do the right thing for Africa and for African diasporas in his own country and around the world.

Postscript: The Obama Administration and North Africa’s Struggles for the “Second Independence”

Since December 2010 North Africa and the Middle East have been engulfed by struggles for freedom, which succeeded in toppling the corrupt dictatorships of President Ben Ali in Tunisia in January, followed a month later by that of President Hosni Mubarak in Egypt. At the time of this writing, the regime of Libya’s erratic tyrant, Muammar Gaddafi is tottering from widespread insurgency. The democratic wave that began sweeping across the continent in the 1990s, from Benin in West Africa to Zambia in Southern Africa to Kenya in East Africa, finally crossed the Sahara to the shake the bankrupt autocracies of North Africa as millions of people fearlessly took to the streets to reclaim their rights and realize their dreams for democratic governance and developmental states.

As with struggles for the “second independence” in other parts of the continent, the impoverished masses and beleaguered middle classes, often led or energized by the youth, were inflamed by their governments’ mismanagement of their economies, which became more evident under the ruthless regime of neo-liberalism and the Great Recession as levels of unemployment and inflation soared, living standards declined, and social disparities widened. Besides the glaring economic deprivations, the protesters were fighting against the moral corruption of their societies by these authoritarian yet weak neo-colonial regimes, their political infantility and diminution of their countries’ enormous potential.

What is striking about these struggles and developments in terms of US-Africa policy is how unprepared and inefficient, almost irrelevant, the Obama administration has been. As the historic drama unfolded, the limits of President Obama’s rhetoric became clearer. The emptiness of his celebrated June 4, 2009 Cairo speech became painfully evident. Previous administrations and the US’s Western allies had long coddled dictatorships in the region during the Cold War in the name of anti-communism, then more recently anti-Islamist terrorism. They preferred the iron fisted stability of dictatorship to the expansive energies of democracy, notwithstanding rhetoric to the contrary. The Western media happily peddled the fiction that democracy was alien to the Arab political DNA.

The policy contortions, contradictions, and uncertainties were embarrassingly palpable in the administration’s desperate public pronouncements that seemed to shift by the day. In the cases of both Tunisia and Egypt, the Obama administration did not side unequivocally with the protesters until the regimes had been ousted. As late as January 25, 2011 the US Secretary of State, Hillary
Clinton, was urging both sides to show restraint and called the Egyptian govern­
ment stable and credited it with looking for ways to respond to the legitimate needs and interests of the Egyptian people. Vice-Presi­dent Biden made the absurd comment that Mubarak was not a dictator and wondered what the protesters wanted.

When President Obama himself finally spoke on the Egyptian crisis, he sought to walk a fine line, praising the protesters on the one hand but refraining from calling for President Mubarak to leave office or hold elections on the other. Similarly, on Libya the Obama administration waffled and remained deeply ambivalent in its support for the protesters and insurgents in March 2011. In his much anticipated May 19, 2011 speech on the “Arab Spring,” the president paid belated tribute to the tumultuous strug­gles and changes that had taken place in North Africa and the Middle East. But he could not bring himself to mention, let alone condemn, the sclerotic dictatorship in Saudi Arabia even once. Few in the region paid the speech much attention.

For the brave men and women fighting for their freedoms in North Africa, and else­where across the continent, the Obama administration is seen at best as an irrelevant bystander, at worst as a dangerous obstacle for its continued complicity with their oppression and exploitation. This under­scores the severe limits of the Obama presidency for the pan-African project. So long as the US remains an imperial power, its capaci­ty to be in the forefront of progressive pan­African struggles will remain unfulfilled, regardless of the representation of members of the African diaspora in the corridors of power, including the presidency.

Works Cited