
Africa and Shifting Global Power Relationships

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INTRODUCTION

The last 10 years have brought unexpected shifts in global power relationships as traditionally powerful states have lost legitimacy and ceded authority to new players. The power of the United States and United Kingdom (UK) seems to be in decline since having defied the United Nations by attacking Iraq without UN approval. The United States and UK lost the respect of other states and the moral authority to lead. On the other hand, France, in upholding the ideals of the UN, has gained global influence. Some African countries, like South Africa and Kenya, also benefited from insisting on respect for the UN. South African leader Nelson Mandela's authoritative voice was able to erode the U.S.-UK military arguments because he derived power from his ethical and moral standing, rather than from military prominence. His criticism encouraged people across the globe to openly oppose the Anglo-American invasion of Iraq. After Mandela criticized countries whose leaders disappointingly "just keep quiet when the U.S. wants to sideline the UN," French, German, and even Russian opposition to the Bush-Blair designs on Iraq became more apparent.¹

When the United States and the UK decided to invade Iraq without convincing reasons for doing so, many countries were opposed to the action, but some were afraid to speak out.² Among the countries whose leaders wanted to keep quiet was Japan, at a time when the Japanese people wished their government would be as defiant as the governments of France and Germany. France and Germany refused to go along with the United States and the UK because their concerns about morality, ethics, and reputation dictated otherwise. The French in particular appeared to enjoy defying the Anglo-American effort to manipulate the UN to legitimize their attack on Iraq. France resented playing second fiddle to the United States and the UK. The Iraq issue offered France a chance to over-

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The conflict over Iraq was the latest issue in the contest for global influence. The feud had intensified after the Cold War, with the French resenting an imposition of an American hegemony detrimental to French interests. “The U.S.,” President Jacques Chirac asserted in 1998, “has the pretension to want to direct everything, it wants to rule the whole world.”³ In attempting to impose its New World Order, the United States was stealing French clients and promoting self-determination and democratization in the French sphere of influence, thus undermining French interests. France then tried to retaliate by infil-

trating the U.S. sphere of influence through the organization of Euro-Latin American conferences.⁴ By opposing American saber-rattling over Iraq, France emerged as a reasonable leader ready to use its veto power to save the UN from committing a moral blunder.

AFRICAN SKEPTICISM OF THE IRAQI INVASION

The French, Germans, and other Europeans who felt the need to ‘dis-invite’ American imperialism may have been encouraged by the Africans. Africans made a distinction between outright aggression and bullying on the one hand, and legitimate self-defense on the other. For example, in 1990, when Iraq invaded Kuwait, Africans supported the U.S. action to expel Iraq from Kuwait, and did not criticize the subsequent imposition of a no-fly zone in Iraq. After al-Qaeda attacked Washington and New York on September 11, 2001, Africans supported the routing of the Taliban from Afghanistan. Because Africans could see a direct connection in both instances between naked acts of aggression and subsequent U.S. military retaliation, Africans had no problem supporting the Americans’ punitive actions. However, this was not the case in 2003, when Africans did not consider the punishment of Iraq to be justified.

What became clear in 2003 was that two heavily armed white powers stretched their imaginations to justify attacking a weakened developing country, and then expected the rest of the world to legitimize their estimation. Having experienced slavery, colonialism, and other atrocities that white powers had com-

mitted in the name of “civilization,” Africans were skeptical of the reasons advanced by the Americans and the British. They could not ignore the fact that globalization is a camouflage for what Ali A. Mazrui, the Kenyan academic, termed “a hidden cultural agenda” to dominate other peoples.⁵ They noted that many Western nations, proclaim to uphold international law, then violate it with impunity. In a September 2003 lecture at Maseno University in Kenya, Pontian Godfrey Okoth, a Ugandan professor, claimed that Bush believes “international relations are relations of power [and that] legality and legitimacy are mere decorations.”⁶ Such a belief stems from the origin of laws meant to regulate European fighting on how to acquire human, material, and territorial resources.⁷ People of non-European origin were not expected to use those laws to their advantage.

In reaction to the renewed effort to impose Western dictates, some African intellectuals warned of looming dangers, and called for appropriate responses to protect Africa’s interests, rather than simply following the dictates of the big powers. Among these is Tade Akin Aina of Nigeria, who warned that discourses on globalization are simply a power play in which the West imposes its hegemonic order at the expense of non-Europeans.⁸ The rhetoric on globalization, insisted Issa Shivji of Tanzania, is aimed at destroying the states that provide services to ordinary people.⁹ One form of destruction, warned Emmanuel Kwesi Aning of Ghana, is the growth of the private security companies that serve Western interests and undermine a state’s ability to serve and defend local people.¹⁰ What should be done, argued Egyptian Samir Amin, is to empower people to deconstruct “the new justificatory rhetoric” of globalization.¹¹ That deconstruction begins with what Paul Tiyambe Zeleza of Malawi believes is a need to accept globalization as an ideology that has to be engaged. Noting that there are academic hustlers who are “mindless parrots for Northern perspectives,” Zeleza called on committed intellectuals to “struggle to create a global civilization in which we as Africans...can feel at home.”¹²

Although they could not stop the invasion, few African states wanted to give moral sanction to an aggression mounted by big powers. The African position was best articulated by Mandela, who spoke his mind against the intended Anglo-American invasion. Addressing the African National Congress’ 51st Conference in December 2003, Mandela criticized “the rise of unilateralism in world affairs,” saying that “the United States, with the United Kingdom in tow, has tended to dangerously disregard the principles of multilateral world governance.” Saying he would continue to express his views, Mandela believed it would be wrong to “allow a superpower to act outside the UN.”¹³ His comments did not shy away from using unflattering language to describe Bush and Blair. Speaking before the International Women’s Forum in January 2003, Mandela asserted that, “other countries like France and Russia must influence the UN to condemn what [Bush] is doing. [He] is acting outside the UN.” He wondered whether Bush and Blair were undermining

the UN because the secretary-general “is now black... They never did that when secretary-generals were white.” He went on to urge Americans to vote Bush out of office in the coming elections, and explained, “What I am condemning is that one power with a president who has no foresight, who cannot think properly, is now wanting to plunge the world into a holocaust.”¹⁴

The effect of Mandela’s speeches was to demystify President George Bush and Prime Minister Tony Blair, showing them to be weak leaders who have to

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bully their way into places instead of using logic and adhering to what is accepted as international law. Although Mandela has no significant military muscle at his disposal, real global power shifted in his favor as his authoritative voice eroded the Bush-Blair military arguments. Many consider Mandela to be the custodian of global ethics and just international norms. Having spent 27 years in jail, under a system essentially condoned by the British and Americans, he had nothing to lose by speaking his mind on what he considered an international wrong. His criticism was encouraged and welcomed by a growing opposition across the globe to the Anglo-American invasion of Iraq. By demonstrating his fearlessness of bullies and demanding rigorous evidence, Mandela

made defying the Americans and the British—despite their economic, technological, and military might—feasible for others.

KENYA: AN EXAMPLE OF AFRICAN DEFIANCE

Kenya, a nation considered a perfect symbol of neo-colonialism in the 1970s and 1980s, and then a postmodern colony beginning in the 1990s, was caught up in the new defiant attitude. In many ways, Kenya is like Japan—because of its heavy dependency on the Americans and the British, as well as on their surrogate institutions, the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF). Kenya had been attacked several times by international terrorists on account of its deliberate closeness to the West, and has since found it necessary—especially under the new regime of President Mwai Kibaki—to clarify that it wants to make independent decisions. One of Kenya’s current priorities is to regain the respect in Africa and the world that it lost in the 1980s and 1990s. It

would not be possible to regain this respect if Kenya appeared subservient to Anglo-American dictates. Thus, one of Kenya's decisions was that it would not endorse choices which made a mockery of the UN. This decision brought Kenya into sharp conflict with the British and the Americans, who thought that Kenya should align with them to garner international respect. When the British and Americans attacked Iraq and ignored the UN, they expected dependent countries to toe the line. They were not amused by Kenya's independent position, and thereafter became openly hostile to Kibaki's regime.¹⁵

The British and Americans mounted a blame-shifting campaign that made the victim, Kenya, seem like a villain responsible for international terrorism.¹⁶ A test of wills was in the offing as Kenyans resisted intensified pressure. When the time arrived for the long-awaited Bush trip to Africa, the United States decided to skip Nairobi, where Bush had been expected to open the newly constructed U.S. embassy. The reason given for the cancellation was that Kenya was not safe, leading Raila Odinga, Minister for Roads and Housing, to ridicule the U.S. claim, pointing out that there was no "Berlin Wall" between Kenya and Uganda to stop terrorists from going into Uganda (where Bush subsequently traveled). He told the United States, "You are not issuing similar warnings for Egypt, Jordan, or Saudi Arabia where there are more terrorist cells."¹⁷ Uganda had supported the invasion of Iraq, and had even agreed to exempt American military personnel from international law requirements when they committed war crimes.¹⁸ Its capital, Kampala, was rewarded with a Bush visit of less than four hours. Peculiarly, the Americans expected Kibaki to travel to Kampala to greet Bush, the way former Kenyan President Moi had done in 1998 to meet then-President Bill Clinton. However, Kibaki went to Maputo, Mozambique, to attend the African Union meeting instead. It was, according to journalist Mwenda Njoka, "a patriotic thing for President Kibaki to get busy on something much more useful to him than a mere handshake with Mr. Bush."¹⁹ Kibaki upheld Kenya's interests against American expectations and thereby gained respect in Africa.

As Kenya started gaining esteem in Africa, Kibaki turned his attention to the global issue in which Africans are sidelined: international trade. He talked to ministers of trade from 20 eastern and southern African countries, and offered up Kenya as an example of the adverse trading practices to which Africans are subjected by developed countries. Kenya, he stated, was "suffering from arbitrary bans and other unilateral constraints placed on our exports into the European Union." Noting that World Trade Organization (WTO) rules were hostile to developing countries, he called for Africans to make a concerted joint effort in confronting the WTO. He wanted African countries to take proactive positions on international trade; instead of reacting to what was "already on the table... We must, therefore, spare no effort at ensuring that we negotiate predictable and acceptable terms of trade and market access." Mukhisa Kituyi, Kenya's Minister

of Trade and Industry, emphasized the “need to integrate in order to compete effectively on the global market,”²⁰ and spearheaded Kenya’s role in forging an African position that would demand such trade and access.

At the September 2003 WTO conference in Cancun, Mexico, Kituyi was not simply the leader of the Kenyan delegation, but the spokesman for the developing world position on opening up markets in the West, as well as on protecting the economic interests of poor countries. Among the

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21 countries on Kenya’s side were South Africa, China, India, Brazil, and Malaysia. Kituyi claimed that the European Union and the United States were “to blame” for the collapse of the WTO because the two had tried “to manipulate...the process” and to “manufacture consensus,” instead of taking the developing world seriously.²¹ This unexpected resistance to what was “already on the table” shocked the Europeans and Americans, for it was essentially the first time that developing countries had done their homework thoroughly in terms of defending their interests. As Kituyi walked out of the conference, followed by delegations from developing world countries, one could sense the power shifting—

from the expected centers in the West to a little country like Kenya.

Kenya’s performance in Cancun raised its profile in terms of international respectability, but the government was still walking a tightrope between meeting the expectations of the British and Americans on the one hand, and serving the wishes of its citizens on the other. The issue of international terrorism was one that Kenyans feared would be used to return them to the days of repression and effectively re-colonize them, and so they became vocal in opposing any government attempt to force parliament to enact a foreign-engineered anti-terrorism law. Since the United States and UK were particularly interested in forcing such a law, a feeling developed that they were looking for excuses to punish Kenya for not supporting their invasion of Iraq, and for its role in the position that developing world countries took at Cancun. Subsequently, Kenyans are today increasingly aware and alert to unreasonable external pressure, and are in turn pressing the government not to cave in to external dictates. The government no longer has unlimited power to commit the country without answering to its citizens. In this case, the people—through their parliament—are likely to save Kenya from embarrassing itself with ill-advised legislations that are clearly at the behest of other countries.

CONCLUSION

Africa has been caught up in the latest version of globalization, and although it has no choice but to be part of it, it has a choice on the way in which it will be involved. African nations can decide what is acceptable and reject what is detrimental to their interests. By making choices that avoid jeopardizing their interests, they will earn respect and legitimacy, and thus accrue more power and an improved sense of self-worth. By limiting the harmful effects of global injustice and asserting their interests through well-prepared, well-presented, and logical arguments, Africans can claim power from those who would deny them their rights. It involves actions like those of Mandela, who, after lamenting the cowardice of many heads of state, went on to condemn what he considered an ill-designed and probably racist effort to undermine the UN. In their effort to undermine the UN by attacking Iraq, both the British and the Americans lost legitimacy and global influence. Power, therefore, is not simply the exhibition of military and technological might; it is also the ability to exert influence based on one's moral, ethical, and logical capacity. By emphasizing their size and military-technological muscles, the British and Americans became weak and lost power and influence. The beneficiaries of this loss are indeed the formerly 'weak' countries, such as France, South Africa, and Kenya. ■

NOTES

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