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Obama, Buhari, and African policy dilemmas

JULY 16, 2015 / AFRICAPLUS

by Richard Joseph

In his inaugural speech as Nigerian president on May 29, 2015, Mr. Muhammadu Buhari memorably declared: “I belong to everybody and I belong to nobody”. He has already taken drastic action to reduce corruption in the oil sector and even cut his official salary and benefits. Just days before his July 20 meeting with U.S. president Barack Obama, Mr. Buhari replaced his country’s top military and security leaders. They had been criticized for incompetence and human rights abuses in the fight against Boko Haram. These actions and others set the stage for an agenda-setting meeting between the two leaders. Soon afterwards, Mr. Obama will leave on his third presidential trip to sub-Saharan Africa with stops in Kenya and Ethiopia. Richard Joseph discusses the significance of the Obama-Buhari meeting, the need to reframe American policies towards Africa, and hopes for a new era in U.S.-Nigeria relations.

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President Barack Obama advocated democratic governance as the key to African progress in his historic address to the Ghanaian parliament on July 11, 2009. Six years later, other policy priorities—especially growth and security—compete with the promotion of democracy. This is a good time for the U.S. to reframe its priorities in Africa: On July 20 Mr. Obama will host a visit from the recently elected Nigerian president, Muhammadu Buhari, and then leave a few days later for Kenya and Ethiopia.

Democracy and governance in Africa

This is a perplexing period for statehood and governance in Africa, and especially for Nigeria and northeast Africa. South Sudan, just four years after its American-promoted independence, is engulfed in politically inspired interethnic warfare. Kenya was similarly traumatized after the falsified results of the 2007 elections, albeit not on the same scale. In Nigeria many feared that a similar fate awaited its ethnically and religiously diverse population in the March-April 2015 elections.

Thanks to a favorable alignment of domestic forces and institutions, Nigeria had a [successful election and peaceful transfer of power](#). Kenya has also made [significant constitutional and institutional progress](#). However, the indictments of its president and vice president by the International Criminal Court for their alleged role in the 2007-2008 violence (despite the case against President Uhuru Kenyatta being dropped) will cast a shadow over Mr. Obama's visit.

In addition to meeting the leaders of the ruling party, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), and the African Union (AU), Mr. Obama will attend a Global Entrepreneurship Summit in Kenya. Since the EPRDF swept to power in 1991, it has benefited from high levels of external aid and posted impressive development achievements, but also conducted harsh repression of its opponents. The high point for party competition was reached in 2005 when the EPRDF was reduced from 88 to 60 percent of parliamentary seats. A brutal crackdown by the regime followed. Its share of the legislature subsequently rebounded to 91.2 percent in 2010 and stayed level in the May 2015 elections at 91.6 percent (or 500 of 546 seats).

The narratives of growth, security, and democracy in [Africa have become snarled](#). In a different

but not unrelated context, *The New York Times* writer David Brooks wrote: “We work hard to cram our lives into legible narratives. But we live in the fog of reality.” Today’s geo-strategic and geo-economic concerns complicate the global promotion of democracy and good governance. This fog of reality induced the late Brookings scholar, Dr. Mwangi Kimenyi, to suggest that President Obama include Nigeria, Ethiopia, and Kenya on his next Africa trip. Kimenyi’s intriguing argument deserves quoting:

The president has avoided countries [in Africa] facing major challenges such as terrorism and poor governance records. For a more lasting impact, though, the president needs to get out of his comfort zone, visit non-“safe bet” countries, and connect with countries showing openness to reforms, are rising economic leaders, and could be key strategic security partners. In this regard, I propose that the president trip cover at least the following countries: Nigeria, Ethiopia, and Kenya.

Seeking common ground between Washington and Abuja

A rift occurred in U.S.-Nigeria relations in November 2014 when the Nigerian ambassador sharply criticized the Obama administration for not providing advanced weaponry for the Nigerian military and for exaggerating human rights abuses there. The U.S. did not relent, as the ineffectiveness and unreliability of the Nigerian military were clearly evident, and arbitrary arrests, summary executions, and other abuses were amply documented by independent organizations. So, on July 20, the leaders of two of the world’s largest democratic federations can do more than reset their countries’ relationship. They have the opportunity to lay the framework for years of enhanced economic, strategic, and political cooperation that Nigeria critically needs to overcome its institutional deficiencies.



Photo credit: *The Punch* Newspaper, Nigeria.

This is an era in which illiberal regimes, capable of projecting power domestically and externally, increasingly fend off demands for democratic governance and the observance of human rights. In Africa, Rwanda and Uganda come to mind, but so also does Ethiopia and Nigeria's neighbor, Chad. The continental and global implications of the Obama-Buhari meeting are therefore significant. Just days after their encounter, Mr. Obama will move on to the cauldron of extremist violence in Sudan, South Sudan, Somalia, and northern Kenya.

Although Nigeria is not on Mr. Obama's 2015 trip itinerary, his meeting with its president is opportune. This July meeting, ahead of his East Africa trip, gives Mr. Obama the opportunity to bring some coherence to the conflicting policy priorities. In recent weeks, terrorist violence in northern Nigeria attributed to Boko Haram has been particularly horrific, with the use of young girls as suicide bombers and the callous killing of both Christian and Muslim worshippers. After the disappointing Goodluck Jonathan presidency, Nigeria has re-entered the "comfort zone" of democratically elected governments. A former military ruler, Mr. Buhari has established his democratic credentials by getting elected on his fourth attempt. There is much about him that will appeal to Washington: his austere lifestyle and Islamic faith, his vehement criticism of Boko Haram as un-Islamic and inhuman, and the vigorous action his government has already taken to reduce corruption in the oil industry.

[Mr. Obama's July 5 statement at the Pentagon](#) will be parsed by Nigerian leaders to see how it relates to the daunting challenges confronting them. Although speaking primarily about the campaign against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, his comments were cast more broadly. Mr. Obama promised to engage "all elements of American power including military, intelligence, diplomatic, economic development ... and perhaps most importantly the power of our values." He emphasized partnering with other countries to strengthen "laws and border security" and the need for a regional political effort. Most critically, he acknowledged the importance of working with local partners, including Muslim leaders and communities, to counter extremist threats. Mr. Obama explicitly mentioned Nigeria as one of the countries to which his remarks applied.

In view of the global patchwork of liberal, illiberal, and failed states, Kimenyi's notion of "safe-bet" countries is problematic. For example, Tunisia's government is the only remaining democratic outcome of the Arab Spring, but it has been forced by terrorist attacks to impose a state of emergency. The democratic values to which Mr. Obama refers, and which were

manifest in Mr. Buhari's resounding electoral victory, are often obscured by the fog of reality. Both American and Nigerian government leaders need a revitalized narrative. They must demonstrate that it is possible for democratic governments to foster inclusive growth, developmental governance, anti-corruption, and counterterrorism while also advancing political liberties and human rights. Policy concordance between Africa's largest nation and the United States will bolster Mr. Obama's position for what awaits him in strife-torn northeast Africa. It should also strengthen Mr. Buhari and his associates in confronting the immense challenges at home.

This essay was first published in [Africa in Focus](#), The Brookings Institution, on July 13, 2015.

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