Africa: Beware of Obama's Second Term

Abdi Ismail Samatar

Abstract: Obama's rise to the U.S. presidency in 2008 gave many supporters of Africa the false hope that U.S. policy toward Africa would become more progressive. When such a shift failed to transpire, advocates argued that the major economic crisis in the U.S. monopolized the president's attention and that his second term would create new opportunities for the continent. These claims failed to take into account the deep-rooted U.S. interests that dominate Africa policy with or without Obama. In addition, most of the Africa advocates have ignored the influence of the new breed of African Americans who staff key positions in the Department of State and whose priority is their own careers rather than a just policy toward the continent. Finally, most African leaders have not advocated for African interests and instead have pursued their particularistic agendas, leaving Africa vulnerable. Given this context, it is unlikely that Obama's second term will introduce an Africa-friendly policy.

Résumé: L'ascension de Barack Obama à la présidence des États-Unis en 2008 a donné à de nombreux défenseurs de l'Afrique le faux espoir que la politique américaine envers l'Afrique deviendrait plus progressiste. Lorsque cet espoir ne s'est pas matérialisé, les représentants de l'administration ont soutenu que la crise économique majeure d'alors aux États-Unis a monopolisé l'attention du nouveau président, et que son deuxième mandat engendrerait de nouvelles opportunités pour le continent. Ces affirmations ont négligé de prendre en compte les intérêts américains profondément ancrés dans les motivations qui animent la politique africaine, avec ou sans Obama. De plus, la plupart des défenseurs de l'Afrique ont ignoré l'influence de la nouvelle vague d'Africains Américains qui occupent des

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positions clé au Conseil d'État et qui donnent priorité à leurs propres carrières plutôt qu'à une politique juste envers le continent. Enfin, au lieu de défendre les intérêts du continent, la plupart des leaders africains poursuivent leurs agendas personnels en laissant derrière eux une Afrique vulnérable. Étant donné ce contexte, il est improbable que le deuxième mandat d'Obama introduise une politique plus à l'écoute des intérêts de l'Afrique.

Key Words: 2012 presidential election

Four and a half years ago, in November 2008, a panel was organized at the annual meeting of the African Studies Association to examine the possible changes to U.S. policy toward Africa after Barak Obama was elected president of the United States. The premise of the panel was that since Obama was the first African American elected to the presidency, it was reasonable to expect that the new administration might pursue an Africa-friendly policy that was different from that of previous regimes. In November 2012 Obama was reelected, and once again we wonder what U.S. policy toward Africa might be like during the second term.

In 2008, I took exception to the celebratory atmosphere that engulfed the African world and other people of good will who had hoped for a U.S. policy that would assist development and democracy in Africa. My skepticism did not underestimate the importance of the Obama victory, since it marked a historic break with the deeply race-driven politics of the United States. It was a victory for all those who wished that racial and other forms of inequality in the country were finally in the past. However, I was only too mindful of the deep moorings of the U.S. power structure and the limited purchase of racial politics.

The assessment of those colleagues who presented papers as part of the 2008 panel was speculative, but we now have the experience of the past four years of the Obama presidency to help us better gauge what to expect in his second term. More recently, analysts of the administration and well-wishers have argued that the Obama administration's ability to effect meaningful changes to its Africa policy in its first term was severely constrained by two interrelated challenges. First, the president inherited the worst economic recession since the Great Depression of the 1930s, which required urgent and sustained action. And second, the administration came to power at a time when the global public image of the U.S. was in ruins due to the excesses of the "war on terror." Logically and legitimately, the president and his team had to give absolute priority to these two top objectives, and this had the unfortunate effect of depriving oxygen to progressive new foreign policies.

Now many Obama supporters claim that despite the lingering effects of the economic recession, the political imperatives of winning a second term will no longer constrain the administration from giving greater attention to African issues. Whether or not the assumptions about the constraining

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effects of the economic and political crisis were correct (and I do not share these assumptions), I would still argue that the administration failed to tap opportunities to engage Africa that would not have required a great expenditure of resources or distracted the president's attention from the serious domestic issues. For example, the administration could have been more serious about genuine democratization in the continent, as in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Somalia, and Ethiopia.

Elsewhere in the developing world, some Obama supporters also argued that his Palestine/Israel policy during the first term was shaped by the U.S. political realities of reelection. These optimists must have been shocked by the unequivocal remarks of the president that were precipitated by the Israeli bombardment of the Gaza Strip after the election. Obama's victory in November 2012, rather than opening a new page in U.S. Middle East policy and giving the president courage to embark on a more balanced and just course of action, appears to have intensified his pro-Israel stance. For Africans and their supporters who dream about second-term transformation, the president's remarks about Palestine should be a rude awakening. It is possible that in Obama'a second term his agenda might be unchained from old anchors through a miracle; however, all the signs point to the unlikelihood of meaningful progressive change.

I would like to suggest that our analysis of the impact on Africa of any U.S. regime change should be guided by an appreciation of three fundamental realities: (1) the general U.S. interest in Africa and the individuals who are its key drivers; (2) the quality of the new president's policy team on Africa; and (3) the nature of African interests and the identities of its leading champions. Systemically and critically answering these questions would require several volumes and go well beyond the scope of this commentary. But I will try to suggest a number of key points to keep in mind when examining what Obama's second term is likely to look like.

U.S. Interest in Africa: Oil and Terror

U.S. interest in Africa faded a bit in the 1990s with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the demise of the Cold War. However, this decline has been reversed with the development of two factors: (1) the emergence of China as an economic competitor, and (2) the country's concerns about terrorism since the bombing of the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998 and the events of 9/11.

The need for imported oil in the U.S., along with China's determination to secure energy sources for its super-hot economy, has elevated interest in Africa. China appears to be winning this game because of its "pragmatic" approach of not "interfering" in the domestic affairs of countries. Although the U.S. still gets a significant amount of its oil imports from Africa, China has gained a substantial foothold with new oil producers such as Ghana, Uganda, and Sudan, and has made some headway with older ones. In spite of these setbacks for the U.S. in Africa, the guardians of U.S. policy in this

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regard are the big oil companies, whose position and influence on African policy have not gone through any transformation simply because a person of African origin occupies the White House.

Analytically, our assessment of U.S. policy toward Africa must take a leaf from U.S. policy toward the Middle East, which has remained unchanged despite the fall of the USSR and the end of the Cold War. Similarly, the prospect of America's becoming more energy independent should not suggest that its interest in African resources, or Africa's geopolitical importance to the U.S., will fade any time soon. China's strategic growth in Africa will remain a key factor for the U.S. government, and that is why the U.S. military presence in Africa since Obama came to power has increased.

War on Terror

Neither the Obama administration nor its predecessors have considered the horrific impact that the "war on terror" has had on African people. We all understand that the U.S. president has to protect U.S. citizens from those who want to visit terror on the U.S., such as Al Qaeda, but there is little appreciation in the Washington halls of power that the fight against this scourge must not be conducted at the expense of the African people.

Although the original focus of the "war on terror" was South and West Asia, Africa has gained more U.S. attention, particularly the Horn of Africa and the Sahara region. The U.S. claim here is that international terrorists are moving into Africa and/or that local merchants of violence are linking up with Al Qaeda. As one former Department of State diplomat told me, "It is not possible to gain a hearing in the halls of power unless you coach Africa policy issues in the terminology of terrorism." Local issues that have little to do with terrorism are framed in those terms, which then impose war on many who seek justice under tyranny. Consequently, the victims of these global machinations respond and are then caught in the traps of the terror-masters. The Somali case is the clearest manifestation of such a misplaced agenda. Indigent people who were terrorized by warlords for nearly two decades decided to fight back and regain their dignity using their faith, Islam, as the principal mobilizing tool. Once this became known, Western media and the terror bosses, and their regional allies, like Ethiopia, interpreted this movement as a terrorist menace. This turned Somalia into a new terror frontier, and in the process tens of thousands, if not hundreds of thousands, of innocent Somalis perished. The Obama administration picked up this issue where the Bush administration left off and took it to new heights.

Elsewhere in the continent the Obama administration has supported regimes that are or were at odds with the wishes and well-being of their people. Egypt's Mubarak was a case in point in which the administration "weighed its options" until the Egyptian revolt was not reversible. Further, the administration expanded U.S. military presence in the continent such that there are at least a dozen countries where U.S. forces are regularly stationed.

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Obama's Africa Policy Team

Finally, beyond the oil and terror issues that have fundamentally shaped African policy, one cannot ignore the new generation of African American members of the administration who have dominated Africa policy formulation. From the Clinton years to the present, a new breed of African Americans has occupied senior positions in Africa policymaking; the Department of State's Africa team has included Susan Rice, Jendai Fraser, and Johnny Carson. It appears that these individuals are driven by mundane career aspirations rather than political ideals of serving the U.S. and Africa in mutually beneficial ways. Many of them see their African heritage not as a moral and ethical signifier that carries with it great responsibility to right injustice, but rather as a resume entry that makes them more attractive than other members of the establishment. This new breed of African American diplomats is joined at the hip with the established order and may in fact not be more favorably predisposed toward Africa than their predecessors. My personal experience with three of these diplomats has convinced me that their worldview is no different from that of their white counterparts and that Africans must be aware of the meaninglessness of race or ethnic politics. Jendai Fraser, Susan Rice, and Johnny Carson are no Andrew Young, Randal Robinson, and Jessie Jackson.

Who Is Minding the African Shop?

With the exception of very few countries, mostly in southern Africa, the continent is not blessed with high-quality leadership that can mind African interests and promote the continent's long-term development while also addressing the needs of others. There are three types of African leaders: those who want to be on the "right" side of Washington in order to have U.S. support for their particularistic (and often nondevelopmental) agenda; those who engage with Washington but who part company with the U.S. when fundamental interests are at stake; and those who refuse to deal with Washington either because their national interests are at loggerheads with the U.S. agenda or because their country has been unduly targeted with sanctions by the U.S. Collectively, there are very few leaders who have their people's interest at heart and who are able to negotiate with the U.S. and others on the basis of that agenda. The other institution that has the potential to negotiate on Africa's behalf is the African Union, but unfortunately, it has been significantly weakened by factionalism and opportunism.

What Now?

The more things change, the more they remain the same. Given the actors and interests involved in defining Africa's relations with the U.S., I do not expect Obama's second term to produce any progressive change of Africa policy.

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