Engaging Africa: Prospects for U.S. Foreign Policy

An Interview with Paul Tiyambe Zeleza

Perhaps nowhere else in the world was the election of U.S. President Barack Obama welcomed with as much enthusiasm as on the continent of Africa. On the eve of the transition between U.S. administrations, YJIA Managing Editor Jason Warner interviewed Paul Tiyambe Zeleza about the future of U.S.-Africa relations and Africa’s own prospects for hope and change in the coming year.

On your website, The Zeleza Post, you have written about the transformative nature of Barack Obama’s election. As we have seen in the African press, his election appears to have been equally transformative for people on the continent. But I wonder, do you actually see U.S. foreign policy towards Africa changing in a fundamental way during the Obama presidency?

Let me first say that Obama’s victory is symbolically critical. But we also must make sure that we understand that, substantively, the forces that have been behind the formation of U.S. policy towards Africa may not be fundamentally transformed. The presidency is obviously an important dimension in the constitution of foreign policy, but we must remember that it is not the only one. There are other very powerful forces, including the military-industrial complex, the corporate sector and powerful cultural industries whose engagement may not necessarily be fundamentally changed because of an Obama presidency. There may be changes on the margins of U.S. policy towards Africa. There may be changes in the rhetoric of U.S. foreign policy. There may be points of congruence, where the interests of African countries and the United States coincide. But we should not automatically be carried away in assuming that an Obama presidency signifies that suddenly relations between the United States and Africa will be progressive in promoting African interests.

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President-elect Obama’s selection for ambassador to the United Nations, Susan Rice, has advocated military intervention in the Darfur region of Sudan to help stop the widespread human rights abuses occurring there. While we are contemplating U.S. military intervention in Africa, we have to go back to the failed U.S. intervention in the 1993 Battle of Mogadishu in Somalia and the scars that it left on the U.S. psyche with regard to intervention in Africa. What role do you think that this mission had in tempering U.S. views toward intervention on the continent?

What I presume it left behind was the need to be careful, but obviously that lesson was not learned because today we see the U.S. intervening in other places, including the current wars that are being fought in Afghanistan and Iraq. The U.S. tends to intervene when it feels its interests are at stake.

Is it realistic to imagine a U.S. military intervention in Darfur?

As a matter of principle of international relations it is extremely crucial that the United States avoid polices that increase the militarization of its engagement with Africa. In dealing with the tragedies taking place in Darfur (and those in the Democratic Republic of Congo and Somalia, among others) it is important that the U.S. does not take the lead. Almost inevitably, once the U.S. takes the lead it reconstitutes the way that the crisis is perceived and the way that the crisis can be resolved. What is crucial in my view is that the U.S. work together with local actors, meaning Sudan’s regional neighbors as well as the African Union. If there is a question of the U.S. providing military support in Darfur, that support should be channeled through very clearly laid out arrangements with these regional actors, because these regional actors a) understand the problem better, b) have to live with the consequences of these actions, and c) have commitments to resolving these conflicts based on sheer physical proximity and the spillover effects that these conflicts can have on them.

I should also mention that it does matter that Africa’s capacity for conflict prevention not be undermined by superpower politics that may or may not be in the best interests of what African nations are already doing. So for me
it is important to avoid the militarization of U.S. responses to Africa, but if military support does need to be undertaken for resolving a conflict, then it should not be undertaken directly by the United States but should be channeled through African avenues.

So it seems that you are suggesting that if military intervention does have to be undertaken, the United States would act most responsibly by offering financial aid but not engaging its own troops directly?

You can provide all sorts of things. You can go through the United Nations, through bilateral agreements, or through whatever regional and continental organizations are trying to resolve the conflict. But the notion that the U.S. acting alone can resolve conflicts has proven to be incorrect.

Continuing on the topic of the militarization of U.S. relations with Africa, I think we would be remiss in not mentioning the newly created U.S. military outfit Africa Command (AFRICOM). As we have seen, AFRICOM has been met with mixed reviews from African and United States citizens alike. The Department of Defense says that the United States’ past military engagement with Africa has been ineffective because control over the continent has been split between three larger command posts – European Command (EUCOM), Central Command (CENTCOM) and Pacific Command (PACCOM) – and that the creation of AFRICOM will allow the U.S. to more effectively contribute to the resolution of conflicts on the continent. AFRICOM’s opponents claim that it is a thin veil to protect U.S. interests in Africa’s oil and mineral resources in the face of encroaching involvement on the continent by China, India, Brazil and so forth. Is AFRICOM a true dedication by the U.S. to promote human security on the continent or is it a neo-imperial push to secure an access point to Africa’s resources?

I will say that the two sides are actually not that far removed from each other. AFRICOM is driven substantively to protect American interests; there is no question in my view about that. The rhetoric of AFRICOM is one that suggests that they are there to promote peace and security in Africa. This again is not unfamiliar. The substantive reasons for undertaking a policy and the practical reasons for that policy are sometimes quite far apart. But that does not mean that the people who are articulating them don’t mean what they say, it is just that in the end, rhetoric and reality often end up very far apart.

As far as I am concerned AFRICOM is part of the militarization of U.S.
dealings with Africa and is in place to protect and promote American interests. This is true in regards to Africa’s oil resources, which are playing an increasingly important role in the global economy particularly because of the difficulties that are being experienced in the Middle East. This is all part of the competition you mentioned with other major global powers, the role of a rising China and India, not mention the historic global hegemons of Africa, Europe. They are all part of the constellation of forces that are driving the U.S. to take a much more profound look at what its interests in Africa actually are.

Again the key for me is not so much what the U.S. is trying to do; countries pursue their interests whether they are misguided or not. The critical issue for me is that African countries are clear as to what their interests are and for them not to be bulldozed by the U.S. African countries need to be very adamant about articulating their interests and sticking to their interests. The fact that no African country has agreed to host AFRICOM in its borders is the very articulation of this type of adamancy.

If we could, I would like to move on to questions of your expertise in economics. Recently, Nigeria was cited as being the most protective market in the world in which to weather the current global economic crisis. The Economist has also run many articles recently about Africa’s positive prospects to avoid being hit as hard as other nations by the impending global recession.

I am interested in hearing whether you think that there are any lessons that the U.S. could learn from Nigeria and Africa in general about the regulation of our financial markets.

This is a very fascinating question. First of all, in regards to the questions that you asked on the impact of the current financial downturn on Africa: African economies so far have been less affected because they have been marginal. The many banks on the continent were less tied to and invested in the global financial markets so they seem to have been protected so far.

The second point is that African countries have been very resistant to financial deregulation. The big battles of the past few decades in Africa have had to do with the rise of neo-liberalism, whose face in Africa has been structural adjustment programs and the deregulation and privatization that have come
along with them. African intellectuals, African states, and African social movements have for many years vigorously fought this neo-liberal agenda, though many of their fights did not yield many results because structural adjustment programs were still imposed by the international financial institutions.

What is the lesson? The lesson is a very simple one and it is one that opponents of structural adjustment on the continent have been saying for decades: the state has a role to play in development insofar as it represents the notion that you cannot relegate the good of society to the whims of the market and that free market fundamentalism is very dangerous. For a lot of African leaders, from government officials to intellectuals to activists, it is like the chickens of neo-liberalism are coming home to roost. We have been warning about this. African nations have already paid a very high price for enacting neo-liberalism, including a devastated physical infrastructure, material infrastructure, not to talk about infrastructures of social cohesion and so on. Now, it is as if Africa is saying, “we told you so!”

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Apart from validating the critiques of neo-liberalism that have long come from Africa, the current global economic crisis has also opened up a new intellectual and policy space for Africa to design, develop and implement the agenda of democratic development of economies and states. This allows for the emergence of development paradigms rooted in the project of African nationalism in which development was not seen solely in terms of economic growth but in terms of redistribution, of equity, of raising standards of living, and of reducing social inequities. This is a serious crisis of course, but like any crisis I think that it gives room for African countries to recover and to reconstruct the nationalist project of African development in a new era of democratization that arose precisely because of the struggles against neo-liberalism.

Historically what you find is that moments of crisis like this one are the key times in which new periods of industrialization have taken place in the so-called Global South. It was during the Great Depression that the industrialization in parts of Latin America, parts of Asia, parts of Africa, like South Africa and Egypt, began to take place. What happens in those moments is that the key hegemonic powers are too busy cleaning up their own houses to try to control other places, so there is a brief moment when countries in the Global South can really try some innovative policies.
Moving from a global to a national economic crisis, economist Steve Hanke from Johns Hopkins University has calculated that as of 14 November 2008, Zimbabwe’s annual inflation rate was 89.7 sextillion (1021) percent. What are the future prospects for a Zimbabwean economy facing such inflationary figures?

The economic crisis in Zimbabwe is fundamentally a product of the political crisis - there is no question about that. The economic crisis will not be resolved unless there is first a political settlement [between President Robert Mugabe and Morgan Tsvangirai, president of the opposition Movement for Democratic Change party]. Once the political crisis is dealt with, the economy will begin to recover. The levels of inflation that Zimbabwe is now experiencing essentially mean that Zimbabwe’s formal economy has collapsed. People are now surviving only in the informal economy. So at a point, the inflation figures that come out of Zimbabwe become rather meaningless – they simply signify the total collapse of the formal economy whose recovery is dependent on massive amounts of capital inflows that will be part of the political settlement. One of the sources of these inflows will come from the Zimbabwean Diaspora that has been produced precisely because of this political crisis. A political settlement will also mean that foreigners and locals who are no longer investing in the economy will return to Zimbabwe and invest once again. Zimbabwe has massive resources – both natural and human. The capacity for recovery of economies like Zimbabwe’s should not be underestimated.

Concerning a resolution to Zimbabwe’s current political impasse: the power-sharing talks between Robert Mugabe and Morgan Tsvangirai are stalled once again, and the widespread cholera outbreak in December 2008 has only worsened the humanitarian situation in the country.

When the international community tries to diplomatically engage Zimbabwe, President Mugabe consistently labels it neo-colonial meddling and the voice of the international community is automatically thrown out the window. What role can the international community play in Zimbabwe when this “neo-colonialism” card is consistently being played?

I think that the international community plays an important role, but we need to be careful when we talk about this question. Typically when we talk about
the international community we talk about institutions outside of Africa, which is itself obviously part of the international community.

I would say that primarily SADC [the Southern African Development Community] bears the greatest possibility for impact for the same reasons that we discussed in talking about Darfur and other conflicts. SADC in my view has to play a much more robust role in the resolution of this crisis and unfortunately the mediations that have been undertaken by former South African President Thabo Mbeki have not yielded the results that one would have wished. Certain members of SADC have taken to protecting Robert Mugabe’s regime in some fascinating ways – some legitimate, some illegitimate - in my view.

What has been particularly unfortunate in the discourse on Zimbabwe has been the very polarization in which the supporters of Mr. Mugabe attribute the economic crisis there to the machinations of the Western powers. And the more that the Western powers talk – Blair and Brown, Bush and Obama – the more the Mugabe regime is able to hide behind the notion that the economic crisis in his country are all designs of Western imperialism.

What the Zimbabwe crisis represents for me is, in a sad way, the crisis of nationalism and particularly the crisis of African countries like Zimbabwe that waged liberation struggles for their independence. Two dynamics exist in this crisis. One is that Zimbabwe and other southern African countries achieved their liberation in an era in which neo-liberalism and structural adjustment were globally ascendant. Unlike countries in the rest of Africa that gained their independence in the 1960s, Zimbabwe did not have the policy room to pursue development given the constraints of structural adjustment policies because the ability of African leaders to provide public goods was already foreclosed. The second issue is that in countries that waged prolonged liberation struggles, legitimacy of the post-colonial dispensation of state power is so deeply embedded – both in the imagination and in actuality – in the liberation struggle. This means that political parties that emerge after independence (in this case, Morgan Tsvangirai’s MDC party) that are fighting for democratic change are quickly de-legitimated because of this overwhelming narrative that embeds regime legitimacy in the liberation movement. Those opponents of the state can then always be considered as lackeys of the imperial forces because they did not participate in the liberation struggle.

 Concerning the resolution of the many of the crises on the continent, you have spoken of the African Union and its potential contributions. In this respect, one of the most fascinating developments on the continent
today is the idea of the ‘United States of Africa’ as being put forth by Libyan president Moammar Quadaffi. Two camps have come out of these conversations.

The so-called “radicalists” (including Mali, Togo, Senegal, Burkina Faso and other West African nations) seek a timely establishment of a continental government. On the other hand, the “gradualists” (including African hegemons Nigeria and South Africa, as well as Liberia and Uganda) advocate for the strengthening of regional blocs instead. Which camp do you believe represents the best hope for Pan-African unity?

The first point is simply to say that these are old debates since the days of decolonization. You will recall Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana declaring that “Africa must unite!” and Julius Nyerere advocating for a much more gradualist, regionalist approach in which regions would first be strengthened as a stepping stone to larger continental unification. These are old arguments.

The issue of African unity needs to be approached from many angles. The most simple is to ask whether African unity is desirable, and I do not think that anyone would have any qualms with this idea because of the causes of globalization today, the fact that it increases Africa’s bargaining power in the international community, and that it helps to diffuse the types of conflicts like that of colonial map-making.

Once you move from that level, you have to ask yourself “what is the feasibility?” The feasibility revolves again around the question of dynamics. What are the sources that are promoting or obstructing that development? This obviously involves looking not only at the operation of individual African states and at the African Union, but the other thing that you have to do is look at the processes of integration that are taking place at other levels. This can range from cross-border trade, travel, business, students, in terms of knowledge production, in terms of communication, etc. What is the constellation of trans-border and trans-national engagements that are taking place in Africa today? In other words, what we must know before we choose either of these approaches is which social bases can be prodded along in the process of bringing about a sustainable continental government.

- Jason Warner served as lead editor for this article.