



Forum for African Democracy: Africa Demos Forum in the News

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By Storer Rowley

EVANSTON, Ill. — Confronting a continent beset with challenges, Northwestern University has launched the Africa Demos Forum, an online network of democracy and policy analysts devoted to the promotion of growth, democracy and security in Africa.

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Professor Richard Joseph meets with Nelson Mandela in South Africa in 1990.

Richard Joseph, the John Evans Professor of International History and Politics at Northwestern and founder of the forum, has advised President Barack Obama and former President Jimmy Carter on U.S.-Africa policy. He hopes [the forum](#) will help inform and inspire Obama to be more proactive on Africa. The initiative is well timed in advance of the president's upcoming trip to Senegal, South Africa and Tanzania.

"The goal of the Africa Demos Forum is to galvanize attention to today's pressing issues surrounding African democracy and developmental governance," Joseph observes. "This is an exciting opportunity to bring experts on Africa together online. My hope is that it will become a hub of informed debate that generates innovative thinking and builds support for important policy ideas."

Joseph also expects the forum will provoke more interest in Africa and bring pressure on U.S. officials and global thought leaders to engage more seriously with a continent currently experiencing accelerated economic growth. In addition, he hopes the online resource will help connect more scholars with Northwestern University Library's internationally recognized [Africana collection](#).

Joseph served as a key advisor on Africa to Carter from 1988 to 1994. He served as a fellow of the Carter Center of Emory University, where he was the founding editor of “Africa Demos,” a publication that closely monitored incipient democratic transitions throughout the continent. The name “demos” stems from the Greek word for “democracy.”

The new website is inspired by the Africa Demos bulletin published by the Carter Center from 1990 to 1995. It aims to encourage constructive debate on urgent issues; expose interested people to frontline research and commentary; and, perhaps most importantly, influence thinking among scholars and policymakers in support of democracy building in Africa.

The Northwestern Library now has digitized all previous issues of the Africa Demos bulletin. Today, anyone worldwide can read the digitized issues, 1990-1995, thanks to the collaboration of the [Carter Center and Northwestern University Library](#).

The bulletins are a welcome addition to the growing body of scholarly work on Africa at the University, much of it anchored by the Africana collection.

Established in 1954, the Melville J. Herskovits Library of African Studies at Northwestern University is the largest separate Africana collection in existence. Its scope is as wide as the continent itself; its subject matter ranges from art, history, literature, music and religion to communications and management. In addition to serving the Northwestern community, the Herskovits Library staff serves regional, national and international scholars. Under the leadership of the Africana curator, David Easterbrook, the library began an “Obama in Africa” collection, which has already gathered fascinating material in multiple formats.

“The Africa Demos Forum will present essays and writings that promote an active exchange of views about Africa,” Joseph says. It will pay particular attention to the problems of democracy and governance, subjects at the center of Joseph’s work over many years.

“AfricaPlus,” as the website is named, is devoted to the promotion of growth, democracy and security in Africa and progress in these areas in mutually reinforcing ways. As an Internet platform, it will seek to build an agora (gathering, assembly) in which information, ideas and documents are shared among individuals who are committed to these objectives.

In the first essay of the Africa Demos Forum, Joseph introduces the forum and sets the stage for essays on key topics as well as specific country experiences. It was published at almost the

same time as Obama met with four African presidents in March 2013.

Other essays now online on the forum include or will include pieces by:

- Bruce Whitehouse, a cultural anthropologist and Lehigh University professor. Whitehouse's essay shows how state and democracy in Mali became "corroded from the inside out," the very theme of Obama's lecture in Kenya in August 2006 when he was a U.S. senator.
- Carolyn Logan, assistant professor of political science at Michigan State University and deputy director of Afrobarometer, a collaborative survey research project that conducts public opinion research on the quality of democracy in 20 African countries.
- Michael Bratton, executive director of Afrobarometer and University Distinguished Professor of Political Science and African Studies at Michigan State University and author of "Public Opinion, Democracy and Markets in Africa."
- Rachel Beatty Riedl, assistant professor of political science at Northwestern and executive committee member of the Program of African Studies and author of the forthcoming book "Power in Transition in Africa: Authoritarian Origins of Democratic Party Systems." Her essay is slated for publication in June.
- Howard French, Columbia University Professor and former New York Times correspondent and author of "A Continent for the Taking." French recently completed a major book manuscript on China and Africa. His essay will follow Riedl's essay.

Drawing on a large network of established and rising experts, the Africa Demos Forum will quickly achieve its primary goal of generating informed and lively commentary on growth, democracy and security in Africa. Joseph and Riedl, assisted by a team of graduate and undergraduate students, will simultaneously build an on-campus working group on democracy in Africa. The work of Northwestern faculty and students will therefore parallel the output of this international agora.

As Joseph wrote in an essay on the Africa Plus site, Obama took the opportunity in a March 29, 2013, meeting with four African presidents, to praise the democratic and economic progress in the continent. "How do we continue to build on strong democracies?" Obama asked. "How do we continue to build on transparency and accountability?"

His answer was forthright: "When you've got good governance — when you have democracies

that work, sound management of public funds, transparency and accountability to the citizens that put leaders in place — it is not only good for the state and the functioning of government, it is also good for economic development.”

Despite those noble aspirations, Joseph observes: “Full constitutional democracy has not yet become the predominant system in sub-Saharan Africa. Democratic advances are countered by retreats, precipitously in the cases of Mali and the Central African Republic. Kenya is balanced on a 50.07 percent vote for Uhuru Kenyatta as president, recalling the slender victory of John Atta Mills in Ghana’s 2008 presidential election. Yet Ghana weathered the challenge and continues to advance politically, economically and in other ways.

“The most populous African country, however, Nigeria, has not consolidated its electoral democracy 14 years after the last military regime departed,” he adds. “And Zimbabwe, so materially endowed, has yet to break decisively with authoritarianism, now accomplished by its neighbors Malawi and Zambia.”

Joseph has devoted his scholarly career to the study of politics and governance in Africa, focusing on democratic transitions, state building and state collapse, and conflict resolution. While Cambridge University Press is publishing Riedl’s new book on African democracy, it is republishing Joseph’s influential 1987 book, “Democracy and Prebendal Politics in Nigeria: The Rise and Fall of the Second Republic.”

Joseph directed the African Governance Program at the Carter Center (1988-1994) and coordinated elections missions in Zambia (1991) and Ghana (1992) and peace initiatives in Liberia (1991-1994). He is a nonresident senior fellow of the Brookings Institution, has been a longtime member of the Council on Foreign Relations and is a board member of the Chicago Council on Global Affairs.

He co-authored position papers as a member of the Africa Task Force of the Obama 2008 campaign. Since then, he has provided input on African policy issues in State Department meetings, on sponsored trips to Africa, such as for Nigeria’s 50th anniversary in October 2010, and via blogs, essays and interviews. He also assisted the conceptual planning of the July 2009 Obama visit to Ghana and was in the audience when Obama delivered his historic address.