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The American Presidency and Democracy Promotion in Africa

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By Richard Joseph

As a Board Member of the Council for a Community of Democracies (CCD), Richard Joseph wrote an essay on the struggle to close the gap between words and deeds in strengthening democratic institutions in Africa. He contends that the Obama Administration has set the bar higher for democracy promotion in its June 2012 “U.S. Strategy Toward Sub-Saharan Africa”. His essay exploring its implications can be read below or on the CCD’s Democracy Dialogue blog of August 23, 2012: http://www.ccd21.org/blog/joseph_africa_us.html

On May 18, 2012, a Symposium of the G-8 Summit was convened in Washington, DC

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a major initiative on global agriculture and food security. In addition to President Barack Obama, Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton, and several leaders of international organizations, the featured speakers included four African presidents: Jakaya Kikwete of Tanzania, John Atta Mills of Ghana, Boni Yayi of Benin, and Meles Zenawi of Ethiopia. Mills and Zenawi have since died. Kikwete, Mills, and Yayi headed governments that are among the most democratic in Africa. Mills's successor for a four-year term will be chosen in democratic elections this December, the sixth successive multiparty election to be conducted in Ghana since 1992. The Ethiopian insurgents, who were waved on by American diplomats to take Addis Ababa in 1991 after many years of armed struggle, have never kept their promise to permit the construction of an open and fair democratic system. The struggle continues, therefore, to match words with deeds in democracy building in Africa.

Just weeks after this Symposium, the White House announced on June 14 a new U.S. Strategy Toward Sub-Saharan Africa. In clear language, it presented the main dimensions of American policy towards Africa, accompanied by a cover letter from President Obama. Issued near the end of the first Obama Administration, this document can be used to assess how well the government has lived up to its promises. It also offers guidelines for American policymakers after the November 2012 elections.

Of the four pillars of U.S. policies, the one mentioned first is "Strengthen Democratic Institutions". The others are "Spur Economic, Growth, Trade and Investment", "Advance Peace and Security", and "Promote Opportunity and Development." What is unusual about the democracy pillar are the bold commitments made. They are anchored to President Obama's declaration in Accra, Ghana, in July 2009: "Africa does not need strongmen, it needs strong institutions." The Strategy "commits the United States" to "challenging leaders whose actions threaten the credibility of democratic processes." "Our message," President Obama declares, "to those who would derail the democratic process is clear and unequivocal: the United States will not stand idly by when actors threaten legitimately elected governments or manipulate the fairness and integrity of democratic processes."

One month after the issuance of the U.S. Strategy, a remarkable article by Caryn Peiffer and Pierre Engelbert was published in the journal *African Affairs*. It is entitled, "Extraversion, Vulnerability to Donors, and Political Liberalization in Africa." "Extraversion" is a concept earlier applied to Africa by British scholar, Christopher Clapham, to refer to the susceptibility of African countries, and especially governments, to external influence. Drawing on a wealth of empirical data, Peiffer and Englebert examine the impact of "extraversion" on political liberalization and

democratization. They confirm what other researchers, included me, have written, namely, that “rapid improvements in democracy from 1989 to 1995” were “followed by overall stagnation”. Further, they contend that both initial transitions and subsequent democratic consolidation reflect the differing degrees of regime extraversion.

An important implication of this study is that sustained external action in support of political liberty and democracy in Africa *matters*, and matters a great deal. It does not imply that such efforts will always produce desired outcomes, since regimes differ in their “extraversion portfolios”. From this perspective, what can be said about the record of the Obama Administration’s first term? In several notable cases, the U.S. government has walked the talk of democracy. It did not “stand idly by” when the “fairness and integrity of democratic processes” were threatened in Côte d’Ivoire. Laurent Gbagbo was forced, through collaborative efforts, to stand down after he lost the November 2010 election. He and his wife Simone now await trial in The Hague for the abuses committed.

The U.S. was also an active participant in the coalition of African and non-African countries and organizations that brought democracy to Guinea after decades of rapacious and repressive governments. The same was true of the restoration of constitutional government in Niger; the transfer of power from a dying President Umaru Yar’Adua in Nigeria; inducing President Abdoulaye Wade to respect the electorate’s verdict in Senegal; and ensuring a peaceful succession in Malawi to Africa’s second woman president, Joyce Hilda Banda. So there are many entries on the positive side of the ledger. However, in a continent of great security challenges – widespread poverty, failed states, Islamic militancy, armed insurgencies, piracy and other woes – a “perfect” record of support for democracy is not achievable.

Despite all this, the Obama Administration has set the bar higher for democracy promotion in Africa: “The United States will take a strong and consistent stand against actions that undermine democratic institutions or the legitimacy of democratic processes. We will evaluate elections against the highest possible standards of fairness and impartiality.” Of course, neither the U.S. government, nor even the smaller European democracies, has ever maintained “a strong and consistent stand” in support of democracy in Africa. Other interests, and especially security concerns, have often forced changes in such positions. If elections in Africa are evaluated “against the highest possible standards of fairness and impartiality”, many will not pass muster. The forthcoming American presidential election could therefore determine whether the gap between U.S. ideals and interests narrows or widens further. *[See Jeffrey Gettleman’s Ethiopian Leader’s Death Highlights Gap Between U.S. Interests and Ideals]*

Key statements in the Strategy document regarding democracy in Africa could have been written by leading students of these processes. While gains have been made, it admits that they are often “fragile”. In a number of cases, the “transition to democracy is uneven and slow”. Leaders abound “who resist relinquishing power”. “In many countries, corruption is endemic, and state institutions remain weak.” What the document in effect acknowledges is that electoral authoritarian regimes, which dominate the African landscape, are relics of an era that will one day come to an end. The government officials who drafted this document are well aware that these statements will be used by democracy advocates in Africa to challenge their countries’ repressive governments, and also to hold the United States government accountable.

Although the Strategy document concerns sub-Saharan Africa, it was issued at a time when this arbitrary geographical designation is even more in question. The “Arab Spring” has had its greatest blossoming in North Africa. Tunisia, Egypt and Libya have shed autocratic governments, and some progress is being made in Morocco towards electoral accountability. The possibility of linking political advances in North and sub-Saharan Africa is an opportunity to embolden and deepen these processes throughout the continent.

If Barack Obama is elected to a second term, his foreign policy team will have its “New Strategy” ready for implementation. If he is defeated, this document can provide an array of ideas for its successor. The views of Mitt Romney and Paul Ryan, and their foreign policy advisers, regarding political liberalization and democracy in Africa are not known. Whatever the outcome of the U.S. elections, the four dimensions of U.S. policy would have to be confronted. It should be noted that there has been a substantial degree of bipartisan support for increased U.S. engagement with Africa over the past two decades. Each succeeding administration has built on what was achieved by its predecessor. The administration of George W. Bush introduced several major programs – on HIV/AIDS, aid financing, and malaria – that were continued under Barack Obama. Both governments renewed the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA), a key initiative of Bill Clinton’s government. While no major U.S. policy initiative in Africa during this period has been reversed, some have been significantly enhanced. One such example, as the Strategy document attests, is democracy promotion by the Obama administration.

Caryn Peiffer and Pierre Engelbert conclude their timely treatise as follows: “With African economies undergoing apparently dramatic changes and donors perceiving increased anti-Western threats on the continent, African regimes might be entering a more turbulent era than

the last two decades.” Whether democracy advances, stagnates, or regresses in Africa during this era will greatly depend, their study shows, on certain factors: the interplay of internal forces in particular countries; the stratagems employed by African leaders and regimes; **and** what is done by major external actors and forces.

The goals of economic growth, peace and stability, and the general widening of opportunities – all clearly articulated in the Strategy document – are often used to justify the stalling of democratic progress in Africa. A “strong and consistent stand” on behalf of democracy, however, is the pillar around which all the others should be arrayed, both in Africa and in the councils of the U.S. and other external governments. Participants in the May 2012 Washington Symposium on global agriculture and food security were greeted by a demonstration protesting violations of human rights and civil liberties in Ethiopia. The successors of Meles Zenawi, and all African autocrats, are put on notice that, eventually, a democratic pillar will be erected in their own Tahrir Square. It is also the one that will remain standing when their autocracies have ended.

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