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American-Nigerian Cooperation: An Uncertain Start to the Buhari era

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The hope that the July 20 meeting between President Barack Obama and President Muhammadu Buhari would heal the rift between their countries concerning the fight against Boko Haram was not fully realized. Two days later, Mr. Buhari reiterated at the United States Institute of Peace the same charges as the administration of his predecessor, Goodluck Jonathan. His blunt criticism has been widely reported: “unwittingly, or I dare say, unintentionally, the application of the Leahy Law Amendment by the United States government has aided and abetted the Boko Haram terrorists.” Back home in Nigeria, there were official claims that Mr. Buhari’s comments were misconstrued. His contradictory remarks at USIP could be attributed to Mr. Buhari’s reliance on appointees of Goodluck Jonathan in key administrative and diplomatic posts. To his credit, the Nigerian president did call for the observance of international human rights law, and the protection of local communities, in the military campaign.

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against Boko Haram. He also articulated what we have called a “revitalized narrative”: the need for democratic governments to foster inclusive growth, developmental governance, anti-corruption, and counterterrorism, while also advancing political liberties and human rights. As American and Nigerian policymakers work to remove the kinks in American-Nigerian strategic cooperation, we provide an edited transcript of a July 20 interview of Richard Joseph by Jerome McDonnell (NPR/WBEZ). It began, appropriately, with a discussion of the rift between the U.S. and Nigeria and concluded with a call for President Obama to pay a state visit to Nigeria.

Jerome McDonnell (WBEZ): It seems as if the U.S. has to patch things up with Nigeria because it didn't really see eye to eye with former Nigerian president Goodluck Jonathan. Where did relations go wrong and what's there to patch up?

Richard Joseph: The fundamental disagreement was over the provision of advanced weaponry to the Nigerian military forces which, as everyone knows, has been unsuccessful in the fight against Boko Haram. This action was impeded from the American standpoint for two reasons. The first is that the Nigerian military forces were in poor shape, and attempts to carry out training missions and other forms of cooperation were stymied. Secondly, human rights organizations like Amnesty International have reported the many abuses by Nigerian forces. So the U.S., because of its own laws, was constrained in meeting the weapons request. There were other reasons for the rift having to do with disappointment with the Jonathan administration in other areas, but the issue of high tech weaponry was the critical gap between the two countries.

JM: How can they turn the page? There's talk about the U.S. re-establishing military relations with Nigeria. Is that essential here? Is that what must happen for Nigeria to be more effective against Boko Haram? How much help is it for the U.S. to patch things up with them?

RJ: First of all, relations were never broken; they just became very strained. Since Buhari's election, there's been a lot of communication and diplomatic visits. A lot of ground work will already have been done by the time the two leaders meet. I expect that a plan of enhanced military and intelligence cooperation has been worked out and the two men are basically sealing what has been decided by their staffs. This issue is not just between the U.S. and Nigeria. Other Western countries with close relations with Nigeria such as the U.K. will also have had the same experiences [in military relations]. Buhari has himself been very critical, as a

former military commander, of the Nigerian armed forces. Of course, he's already removed the military chiefs and relocated the headquarters of military operations against Boko Haram.



President Buhari meets President Obama at the White House. Defeating Boko Haram was the primary topic of discussion. (Source: BBC)

JM: His approach seems to be that he wants to rely more on international cooperation with neighbors to quell the Boko Haram situation. But can he do something really different? Since the Nigerian military seems to have its own way of doing business, I don't know if just removing the guys at the top is going to change everything.

RJ: You're correct. It's not just with the Nigerian military. So many Nigerian institutions have become hollowed out and dysfunctional because the level of corruption is absolutely extraordinary. However, getting back to your point about cooperating with neighboring countries, Mr. Obama made a pertinent remark when he spoke at the Pentagon on July 5th. He stated how important it is to build relations with local actors, and how much regional political efforts are needed to counter extremist violence.

The government of Chad, for example, has been very critical of the lack of cooperation on the ground. Several weeks ago, Chadian forces succeeded in pushing Boko Haram away from some border areas. They then sat for days waiting for Nigerian troops to come and replace them. Buhari is sending a message that Nigeria has once more a true commander-in-chief. He is sending a message that, at all levels, military personnel have to function as members of the army that Nigeria once knew.

JM: I read a piece on the BBC website by a Nigerian who spoke of the sky-high expectations

for Buhari. He's going to come in and kick some rear on everything because that's the kind of guy he is. He's going to fix corruption, fix the financial situation, and fix the military. But then there's disappointment that he hasn't cleaned slate and done more. What's the realistic expectation of what Buhari can get done?

RJ: I think realistic is a very good word. First of all, Nigeria is a very big country, over 170 million people. It is also very complex, ethnically, religiously and otherwise. After less than two months since Buhari's inauguration, we have to be careful about our expectations. Also, there is a lot of rot in the system. We should not expect that Buhari will wave a magic wand because he doesn't have one. His removal of the military leadership is important. So are his actions regarding the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC): He just fired the whole board.

Of course, the NNPC is notoriously dysfunctional. My colleague Professor Rotimi Suberu, [writing in AfricaPlus](#), came up with several negative adjectives to describe how distressing that situation is. I think Buhari is taking each one of these problems in turn. He's been criticized for not appointing all the members of his cabinet. One huge challenge in Nigeria, however, is the politics of ethnic arithmetic that Suberu ably describes. The quality of many individuals appointed in this way turn out to be deficient. This is also true of other office-holders such as legislators. It is better that Buhari take his time and really have a first-rate set of people around him. In large part, this was not the case for Goodluck Jonathan. What's important is that, by the end of the process, the government has the kind of team that Nigeria needs and which also reflects national diversity.

JM: I was reading up on this process. Cabinet ministers have to be appointed from every state in the federation. Since there are many states, double ministers end up being appointed in some situations. It doesn't sound like a model of efficiency.

RJ: Yes. There are two sides of to this issue. The good side, and something I keep stressing, is that Nigeria **is** a democratic federation. Nigeria has always been committed, even during the military eras, to being a constitutional republic like the United States. The second side is, as you and [I talked a few years ago regarding my book on prebendalism](#), that politicians regard government offices in Nigeria as opportunities to be exploited to garner financial gains for themselves, their cronies, their kinfolk, and so on. That system has become further entrenched. In fact, it **is** the system.

Mr. Buhari declared at his inauguration: "I belong to everybody and I belong to nobody." Nigeria

needs a leader who will respect the constitution, be lawful in his conduct, while also rising above the morass of prebendalist politics. It turned out that Nigeria now has a president who is in a position to do this. We know from his career that he's not about self-enrichment. When governors and others come knocking on his door seeking to have funds drawn from the Excess Crude Account and similar revenue-draining practices, Nigeria needs a president who knows when to say NO.

JM: President Obama seems to have had an attitude toward Africa that is: "I will reward the countries that are doing well in democracy." He's gone to Ghana and places that look good. Now he's engaging with Nigeria that has all these issues. He's making a trip to Ethiopia where the ruling party and its allies got 100% in the recent parliamentary elections, and to Kenya which has a troubled electoral history. Can President Obama pivot and be helpful to countries that are struggling along different paths?



President Obama addresses the African Union in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia (Source: Voice of America)

RJ: That is a really important question. We are aware of what's going on in the world with all the chaos and disorder, horrific acts of mass violence, and so on. That is the global reality and also the reality in parts of Africa, especially where President Obama will visit in a few days: the northeast of the continent. But again, going back to his July 5th statement at the Pentagon, Mr. Obama talked about the power of our values. We also just heard British Prime Minister David Cameron say that we have to stand up for our liberal values in confronting global terrorism.

I personally believe it is much more fundamental than that. I think it is a *civilizational* struggle. It

is a case of human civilization confronting the inhuman activities being perpetrated. This is the reality that President Obama is facing. It is important that he deals with the realities on the ground, which includes whether governments have the capacity to project power domestically and externally. On the other hand, there is disorder, state failure, and humanitarian crises to be confronted. While doing so, the essential commitments of America to democracy, good governance, human rights, and constitutionalism must be maintained. Those are ideals that Nigeria also stands for, and these should be the axis of American-Nigerian relations.

Kenya has been ambiguous, with democratic gains as well as setbacks. Ethiopia is much more problematic because, as you mentioned, the ruling party and its allies captured 100% of legislature seats in the May 2015 elections. The ruling party, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Party (EPRDF), stayed at its comfort level in the legislature which is garnering over 90% of the seats. There's no mystery about how such a lopsided outcome is achieved. On the other hand, [the Ethiopia government](#) has been a strong ally of the United States. The U.S. and other nations have relied on Ethiopia to be a gendarme in the region with regard to such intractable situations as war-torn Somalia. In the case of the terrible catastrophe in South Sudan, meetings to achieve a resolution often take place in the Ethiopian capital, Addis Ababa.

Of course, we have a history of working with autocratic regimes, whether Russia, China, or others. In international affairs, you often have to deal with people who you do not share your fundamental principles about politics and government. President Obama, however, is in a position to make clear that while we seek the capacity to implement policy and preserve order, we also want to see progress towards democratic government and the observance of human rights – starting from whatever stage countries happen to be in their political evolution. I think it is really important, therefore, that he is meeting with the leaders of Nigeria, Kenya, and Ethiopia.

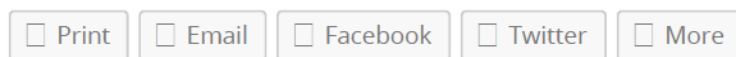
Permit me to add one thing. It has been said that the upcoming trip is likely to be Mr. Obama's last one to Africa as U.S. president. Well, I believe he should definitely visit Nigeria before he leaves office. I was in Nigeria, teaching at the University of Ibadan, when President Jimmy Carter paid a state visit in 1978. Subsequent visits by high-ranking officials, including secretaries of state Hillary Clinton and John Kerry, have taken place. But President Obama must go to Nigeria. Bear in mind that Nigeria has thirty-six states, some of which are larger in population than many African countries. The people of the Nigerian Federal Republic deserve a visit, almost four decades after the last one, from the President of the United States.

For the interview with WBEZ, see [this link](#).

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