

US Secretary of State Colin Powell's Africa tour: a picture of arrogance and hypocrisy

Ann Talbot
11 June 2001

The tour of four African countries by Secretary of State Colin Powell took on the character of a colonial governor general's progress, as he went from country to country issuing orders and dispensing praise to those local rulers who had pleased their masters. All that was missing to complete the picture was a white pith helmet and an ostrich feather.

Each of Powell's speeches during his May tour stressed the same issues: democracy, accountability and transparency. These words have become a mantra for the international financial institutions, Western governments and aid agencies. For Powell to try and lecture on democracy is the height of hypocrisy. He represents a government that came to power by stealing an election, winning 600,000 fewer popular votes than its main rival. Thousands of black Americans were debarred from voting in the recent presidential poll. Gangs of Republican political thugs physically prevented officials from carrying out manual recounts in Florida.

To these undemocratic procedure was added a network of family corruption and patronage of the type that Western governments have criticised in African regimes. Powell nonetheless felt able to tell Presidents Moi of Kenya and Mugabe of Zimbabwe that they should retire from office, and to instruct President Museveni of Uganda to introduce a more democratic constitution.

Powell's air of moral authority is a fraud. His real position in Africa was that of the victorious imperial general, whose main claim to fame is bombing Iraqi cities and strafing retreating soldiers in what returning US pilots referred to as a "turkey shoot". Still very much the soldier, Powell kept calling the aides who accompanied him on his African tour his "troops".

None of this would have been evident from the response of the African leaders who met him. All were uniformly obsequious. Press reports described his effect on them as "magnetic". Asked about the response of African heads of state to him, Powell replied, "there's a bit of pride that I'm an African-American. I'm pleased there is that subtext."

Powell is the first black US Secretary of State to be appointed, and he exploited this fact for all it was worth during his trip. He confessed to reporters that he felt "an emotional twinge" at visiting Africa, reminding them that his parents were Jamaican immigrants and that his ancestors were slaves from West Africa.

The African press reported conversations in which ordinary Africans expressed their belief that "brother" Powell would take a special interest in Africa, sympathising with the poor and dispossessed.

Eager to further this image, Powell linked hands with young Aids sufferers in Soweto to sing "Lean on Me." He visited the sprawling slum of Kibera in Nairobi, where thousands of workers live in

corrugated iron and mud shacks, without even the most basic sanitation or power. The Aids projects of Kibera are a regular stop on the itinerary of visiting dignitaries; only last year Madeleine Allbright made exactly the same trip. The purpose of the visit in each case is the same. It is intended to demonstrate the supposed concern of Western governments for Aids victims, while they continue to insist that Africans can combat this deadly disease through "self-help" and only the most minimal contributions from the West.

Powell's trip was true to type. The Bush administration has contributed just \$200 million to the new UN Aids fund. This is despite the fact that even Kofi Annan sets the figure needed at an annual \$10 billion. Powell described the paltry sum, as "a significant amount of money", telling reporters, "It's \$200 million more than there was the day before."

Not only has the Bush administration given a derisory amount to Africa in Aids relief, it is threatening to undermine Aids prevention programmes by its appointment of a leading Vatican advisor John M. Klink to head the State Department bureau that deals with population and refugee issues. Klink opposes the use of condoms, which until now have been recommended to prevent the spread of the HIV virus. Klink and Andrew Natsios, the new head of the US Agency for International Development, will call on Christian and Muslim clerics to lead a campaign for sexual abstinence.

As Powell toured the Aids projects, he heard the accounts of Aids victims and their relatives. Patricia Asero's story was only one of many. She told Powell how her husband and her son had died of Aids. Recognising that she too would die of the same disease soon, the grief stricken woman pleaded with Powell to help make drugs available to Africans "Part of my family could have been saved," she said, "if we had these cheaper retrovirals."

Powell's response to this and other similar appeals was to defend the drug companies' right to make profits. "One has to remember that an investment is made to produce these drugs, to do the research. And if you don't have some return on that investment pharmaceutical companies won't do it," he explained to reporters.

Powell began his trip in Mali, which is now praised as a prime example of democracy in Africa. What Powell and the Bush administration mean by democracy becomes apparent in this, one of the poorest countries in the world.

Malian President Alpha Oumar Konaré was elected in 1997 with what *Africa Confidential* magazine call a "North Korean" majority of 98 percent. Political power lies in the hands of a few elite families. The same people have benefited from the government's privatisation programme. Leading families have made a killing out of the creation of a Malian cell phone network and are now positioning themselves to

do the same out of the African Nations Cup, the continent-wide football tournament that Mali is due to host.

While the rich are building grand new villas along the river Niger, the three million people who depend on cotton growing face a bleak future. The Compagnie Malian pour Développement Textile, the state-owned cotton company, is virtually bankrupt. Its debts to foreign banks stand at \$42 million and a further \$74m are “unaccounted for”.

Zambia was not on Powell's itinerary, but he praised the country's President Frederick Chiluba for agreeing to resign his post at the end of his term. Closer examination reveals the picture of Zambia as a thriving democracy is as false as that of Mali. In March, Chiluba purged his critics from the National Executive of the ruling party, the Movement for Multi-party Democracy, and has since used the security forces to intimidate and suppress them.

Former Labour Minister Edith Nawakwi was arrested, after she after opposed Chiluba's bid to amend the constitution to allow him to stand for another five-year term in office. She alleged that government thugs threatened to rape her if she persisted in criticising Chiluba. Amos Malupenga, news editor of the *Post*, which reported Nawakwi's allegations, was also arrested. Other opponents claim that they have been become victims of traffic accidents and that their offices have been flooded with gas.

Chiluba only agreed to stand down at the end of his term when a third of Zambian parliamentary deputies backed a motion to impeach him for his strong-arm tactics and as the country was swept by riots and strikes. Popular opposition has grown as a result of the privatisation of Zambia's copper mines, which has cost thousands of jobs. Poverty has deepened while the political elite, including those who now present themselves as Chiluba's opponents, have siphoned off money and property for their own benefit.

Genuine democracy is impossible when the gulf between rich and poor is as wide as it is in Africa. When wealth is accumulated in the hands of a few, mere access to a ballot box does not ensure democracy, and even that right becomes precarious. Real democracy demands social equality rather than merely the right to vote.

Powell claims that if the African countries would only get their political systems in order, trade and investment would follow. He stressed the advantages that would flow to Africa following the passage of the new African Growth and Opportunity Act, which was carried in the US legislature last year with backing from Democrats and Republicans. As a result of this measure, exports from beneficiary countries have increased by 24 percent in the first quarter of this year. Exports from Madagascar to the USA have increased by 138 percent and from Senegal by 544 percent.

These seemingly dramatic increases represent only a small amount of trade. The real purpose of the act is not to open up the American economy to African imports but to force Africa to accept exports from the US. Countries can only qualify under the act if they agree to import US manufactured goods. The act is effectively creating a captive market for American industry.

A recent report from the charity Oxfam said, “Unveiled as a radical move to grant completely unrestricted access to US markets for all sub-Saharan African exports, it [African Growth and Opportunity Act] offers almost nothing, since the US market is already quite open. The areas in which it is not open, such as textiles, are of limited interest to Africa because the region is not competitive. Just to ensure that the textile sector was protected, the recent US-Africa-Caribbean trade bill stipulates that exporters of apparel from Africa are required to use yarn and fabrics imported from the US to benefit from duty-free

access.”

To the extent that manufacturers invest in Africa they will create low wage jobs, particularly in the textile industry. It is an attempt to maintain the profitability of US companies that find they cannot compete on the world market even when paying minimum wages in the USA. They hope to find an even cheaper workforce in Africa, one that is forced into compliance by political repression.

While this aspect of the legislation is important to the Bush administration, even more central to US interests are Africa's immense mineral reserves. Not only does Africa possess vast oil and gas deposits but the continent also has a wide range of minerals, including uranium and many rare minerals that are vital to the production of the specialised alloys used in aircraft manufacture.

Powell is continuing the effort off the previous administration to increase the US hold over Africa at the expense of the former main colonial powers, Britain and France. He was forced to correct the gaffe that Bush made during his election campaign, when he said that Africa was not important to the US. Powell repeatedly assured his hosts that Africa is important to him and to Bush.

Even with the ending of the Cold War, Africa remains significant because of its mineral wealth and its strategic relationship to the Middle East, and due to the number of sea routes that pass its shores. Now that US policy in Africa is no longer dominated by its rivalry with the Soviet Union, competition between the imperialist powers has come to the fore. Powell's visit, one of his first overseas trips, was staking the new administration's claim to the continent.

The four countries that Powell visited were all, in one way or another, important to US strategic interests. Mali is now a member of the UN Security Council and is part of ECOWAS, the West African regional grouping that the US hopes to use to bring the civil wars in Liberia, Guinea and Sierra Leone under control. South Africa is vital to US interests in southern and central Africa as a whole and for its position on the Cape shipping routes. The ANC has played a crucial role in negotiating peace accords in Congo and the Great Lakes area. Uganda and Kenya have long played an important part in US policy in the Horn of Africa. Uganda's support was essential in bringing down Mobutu, the Congolese dictator, when the US decided it no longer had any use for one of its main Cold War African allies.

Powell's rhetoric was strikingly similar to that of the nineteenth century colonialists, who justified their conquests in terms of free trade and the West's “civilising mission”. Not everyone was taken in by his hypocrisy. Riot police had to be called to Witwatersrand University in South Africa, where protesting students sat down in front of Powell's motorcade as he attempted to leave the campus. He had previously addressed staff and students at the university. Even in the controlled atmosphere of this meeting Powell met with opposition. One student asked why America was continuing to bomb Iraq, saying, “I don't know what we should call you, either a revolutionary, a reformer, or a modern Uncle Tom, as in a sell out.”



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact