

Obama's neocolonial mission in Africa

Ann Talbot
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Last week, President Barack Obama flew from the G8 summit in Italy to Accra, the capital of Ghana in West Africa, for his first visit to Sub-Saharan Africa since becoming president. "I have the blood of Africa within me," he told his Ghanaian audience, "and my family's history reflects the tragedies and triumphs of the larger African story."

The value of Obama's family background was recognised early in his bid for the presidency by Zbigniew Brzezinski, the national security adviser to President Jimmy Carter and a key figure in the formulation of Obama's foreign policy. In August 2007, Brzezinski declared that Obama "recognizes that the challenge is a new face, a new sense of direction, a new definition of America's role in the world."

Brzezinski was among major figures in the US foreign policy establishment who saw in Obama a means of giving the United States a "new face" to the rest of the world, something they deemed critical after the blunders and setbacks to American imperialism under Bush.

Obama lived up to expectations in Ghana. He played on his African ancestry, just as he had emphasised his Muslim heritage the previous month in Cairo.

The image of the two Obama children walking out into the sunlight from the "door of no return" at Cape Coast Castle, from which so many Africans did not return, was a carefully crafted photo op. Leaving this scene of so much human suffering, Obama said, "It reminds us that as bad as history can be, it's always possible to overcome."

This was meant to imply that no matter what Africa has suffered in the past, and no matter what the continent continues to suffer at the hands of the banks, corporations and Western governments, the responsibility—and the fault—rests with the African people themselves.

Obama brought an uncompromising message, spelling out in a more open way than George Bush dared to do during his visit to Ghana last year that aid would be made available only in return for the implementation of policies that serve the interests of the US government and corporations—and that there would be less of it in future.

"Development," Obama told parliamentarians, "depends upon good governance. That is the ingredient which has been missing in far too many places, for far too long. That is the change that can unlock Africa's potential. And that is a responsibility that can only be met by Africans."

"Africa's future is up to Africans," he repeated.

The lecture also carried a threat. "We have a responsibility to support those who act responsibly and to isolate those who don't, and that is exactly what America will do," Obama declared.

The BBC's correspondent, Andrew Harding, was struck by the bluntness with which the president felt able to speak to his hosts. He wrote: "It was a very broad-ranging speech, but Mr. Obama has an ability because of his heritage, his Kenyan father, to reach out and speak to Africans in a way that I think most foreign leaders would find very difficult."

It was "a message no pink-faced Western leader could have delivered without arousing resentment in Africa and politically correct abuse from hand-wringers at home," Libby Purves, a columnist for the London *Times* noted.

Purves' derogatory reference to politically correct hand-wringing is a significant one. It is incontrovertible that any possibility of Obama presenting himself as a progressive alternative to the "pink-faced" Bush is largely thanks to the claims of his liberal and "left" apologists that an African-American in the White House represents a gain for black people everywhere and marks a new era in US and world politics.

Obama's Ghana speech was warmly received by the Republican right. Bret Stephens, writing in the *Wall Street Journal* under the headline "Obama Gets It Right on Africa," described the speech as "by far the best of his presidency."

Stephens continued: "Since British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan gave his 'Wind of Change' speech (also in Ghana) nearly 50 years ago [The speech was, in fact, delivered in South Africa] Western policy toward Africa has been a matter of throwing money at a guilty

conscience (or a client of convenience), no questions asked... Maybe it took a president unburdened by that kind of guilt to junk the policy.”

The provision of aid has always been a political mechanism to force semi-colonial countries to pursue policies that serve the interests of the imperialist donors. But whereas Bush was obliged to make some token gestures, such as setting up the Millennium Challenge Account and increasing funding for Aids and malaria, Obama has used the kudos he derives from his ancestry to insist point-blank that African governments toe the US line.

Obama’s insistence that Ghana and other African governments achieve “good governance” is a demand for more of the free-market measures that are already being imposed with disastrous results for the social conditions of the population. “Good governance” means privatising essential services such as telecommunications, water and power, as well as social services like health and education. It also means removing subsidies from small farmers and abolishing import controls.

Ghana has gone a long way down that route, which is why it has been favoured with visits from two US presidents. It is far from being one of Africa’s poorest countries, but 70 percent of the population in its northern regions live on less than a dollar a day. Life expectancy is only 58 years. Women often have to walk more than 3 kilometres to find water, and it is seldom clean.

This situation is set to worsen dramatically. The recession has hit Africa hard. Ghana was among those countries granted debt relief in 2005, but with the value of its currency falling, it is rapidly sliding into debt once more. The government’s response has been to impose an austerity budget in an attempt to balance the books.

Obama has shifted the emphasis of the “war on terror” from Iraq to Afghanistan and Pakistan. But the place of Africa in US global strategy remains essentially the same. First, it is a vital source of strategic resources such as oil and gas, but also many key minerals. Second, a high proportion of the world’s shipping lanes run close to Africa’s shores. It follows that any American administration must make the establishment of US domination of Africa a priority.

Obama’s speech was directed to the ruling elites throughout Africa, and the same message will be delivered by other administration officials. He was unable to visit Kenya, his father’s homeland, because a year after the election and the intercommunal violence that followed, the country is still unstable. But Secretary of

State Hilary Clinton will head a delegation for trade talks in Kenya later this summer.

Like Obama’s trip, the underlying aim will be to re-establish US hegemony in the face of increasing competition from Europe, India and China. The old colonial European powers are long-standing rivals in Africa. Both France and Britain have their interests in West Africa. China is a relative newcomer. Trade between Africa and China was worth \$10 billion in 2001. By 2008 it had increased to \$107 billion.

Ghana is a new oil producer. The first supplies came on tap this year. It is valuable both for its modest supply of oil and because it may offer a military staging post to give the US reach over the whole West African region.

With less aid forthcoming, Obama will have to rely more than ever on US military might to secure its control of Africa—both through the supply of military equipment to its clients and through direct intervention.

No African country has yet offered to host a base for the new US African command, Africom. Ghana may well be the first, judging from the attention it is getting from the White House. Obama has made much of the “war on drugs” and has given Ghana three new gunboats for patrolling its coastline.

The purpose of the Africom bases is to provide facilities that will allow the rapid deployment of highly mobile troops. Djibouti has provided a valuable base for this kind of action in Somalia. US special forces from Djibouti took part in the Ethiopian invasion of Somalia in 2006 to support the Transitional Federal Government, plunging the country into another round of civil war. Obama has recently increased military aid to the US-backed regime in Somalia.

A network of such bases would enable the US to intervene at will under the cover of proxy forces, while cynically claiming that Africans are sorting out their own problems along the lines of Obama’s rhetoric in Ghana.

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