AFRICA'S LETHARGIC FOREIGN RELATIONS: UNDERSTANDING THE DIMINISHING VOICES OF AFRICAN LEADERS AT THE GLOBAL STAGE

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Abstract: African leadership has over the years suffered a bitter loss of its prestige and influence at the global stage because of sundry problems buffeting the continent and its people. But, the diminishing clout of African leaders could be traced to their own miscalculations about the roles expected of their countries in the global system where politics and economics have significant roles to play in the assessment of the status of states as actors at that level of diplomatic engagement. From the 1960s when so many African countries earned their political independence from their erstwhile colonizers, the high rating of the continent peaked then but began to fall precipitously with the end of the cold war between the United States and the Soviet Union as from the 1990s. African leaders of newly independent States also had problems managing the post-independence challenges in their countries. That means that the assertiveness of African leaders at the global stage and the vibrancy of their countries' foreign relations in the early post-independent years suddenly began to dwindle. This commentary on the diminishing voices of African leaders at the global arena is an exegetical analysis that attempts to provide some explanations for this observed trend and raises some key issues whilst proposing remedial actions.

1.0. Perspectives on Africa's lethargic foreign relations: the challenge of Leadership

No doubt, the rating of African leadership in global affairs has changed over the years. This is so because the context and operational environment for the exercise of leadership in much of Africa have significantly changed. In other words, leadership is greatly influenced by the same environmental forces that brought it into existence, and for which it would seek to influence positively or otherwise in pursuit of some broader goals which are often portrayed as the "national interest" or corporate interest of the governing elite. Thus, African leaders that emerged from the independence struggles through which they wrenched power from the colonial administration were different in several respects from their military and civilian successors because the context and environment of their leadership are different.

To properly situate this within the context of the historicity of the continent's leadership, the different leadership that had been in the saddle since the attainment of independence in Africa can be classified into three types, namely, (i). the immediate native successors of the colonialists that I would describe as the 'nationalist inheritors of power' from the colonial administration; (ii) the military adventurists who toppled the administration of the native successors of the colonialists, and (iii) the post-military civilian leaders that emerged from the re-democratization process which was occasioned by the intense local and global agitations for democratic governance in Africa.

With respect to foreign relations, the leadership style displayed by the 'immediate native successors of the colonialists' was an admixture of diplomacy and ultra nationalistic pursuit in their engagement with the world- a style bred by ingrained suspicion of external influences

which they feared could aim at controlling them , and make nonsense of their newly won freedom from the colonialists. In a way, these African leaders were sensitive and careful. They were also interested in making more friends for their countries on the basis of mutual respect for the territorial integrity and political sovereignty of each of the countries they are relating with. Leaders such as Kwame Nkrumah(Ghana), Tafawa Balewa(Nigeria),Jomo Kenyatta (kenya), Julius Nyerere(Tanzania), and a host other African leaders in this category asserted boldly the foreign policies of their newly independent countries on the world stage. The assertiveness of this class of African leaders was borne out of the experiential knowledge they acquired through their disciplined and focused commitment to the independence struggle as well as their single-minded determination to wrench political power from the colonial administrations in their different countries.

However, the internal contradictions in each African country began to engender unhealthy rivalries among the political elites in the early period of the post –independence civilian administrations in much of Africa. The ensuing competition for power was acrimonious and indeed unwholesome, because it fractured and weakened their political legitimacy. It was this inclement political atmospherics that instigated the military to topple the civilian administrations in most African countries in just few years after their attainment of political independence. The military was neither condemned nor praised by the global community for unseating democratically elected governments in Africa; the world was indifferent to Africa's condition. This was partly the reason why the military rulers of the late 1960s in Africa manifested some degree of assertiveness in the conduct of their countries' foreign relations with other countries of the world. In a sense, the courage that the military rulers projected at global stage was a defense mechanism to assuage their feeling of guilt for displacing democratically elected administrations.

In addition, the US, UK and indeed the western world could not impose their visions on the military governments in Africa because of the prevailing ideological rivalries between the two superpowers (USA and the USSR), as they sensed that any attempt to impose any condition on Africa would be repelled by African military rulers. Thus, for as long as the ideological cold war between the US (plus other capitalist countries) and the USSR (and allies) lasted, African military rulers enjoyed the game of playing the West(US and allies) against the East(USSR and other socialist countries), thereby giving an impression of having some modicum of power in their countries' foreign relations. This trend continued until the early 1990s when the collapse of the USSR in 1989 triggered a series of developments that culminated in the ascension of the US to the pinnacle of world affairs- a situation that made the US to commence its activist foreign policy which entails the setting and imposition of standards of international behavior for countries of the world including African countries. Thus, with the demise of the USSR, African countries in particular began to experience immense pressure from the US and other western countries to pursue governance reforms, a development that placed African military rulers in uncomfortable position, and with no option other than to conform and comply with the dictates of the West. The once vibrant, boisterous and assertive African military rulers became obsequious and docile, with a willingness to curry for favour from the US and its allies in order to retain power.

The post- military civilian rulers are the beneficiaries of the intensified pressures that the West mounted on the military rulers to pursue governance reforms and democratization. These emergent African civilian leaders owe their political power to the pro-democracy agitations of the West and in particular the US which insisted that military rule or dictatorship of any kind constituted a violation of the political rights of the citizens. Emerging from the political sidelines with the strong inputs of the US and the western powers, these post-

military civilian leaders are obligated to defer to the US as a sign of appreciation and respect for the leading role it played in the implementation of governance reforms in their countries. These African civilian leaders are therefore not expected to show any resistance to extraneous influences from the US and its allies. In other words, the foreign relations of these African leaders' countries would tilt more towards western countries with the US as the hegemonic authority in the equation.

There are of course other factors that could determine how assertive or otherwise African leaders' foreign relations stance would be. These factors comprise the economy, ideological orientation of the ruling elites, the perception of the foreign policy elites, natural resources, geographical location, and population, among others.

2.0. How did African Leaders become foreign-dependent over time?

As pointed out earlier, the transition from military dictatorship to civilian democratic system of government in Africa since the 1990s did not happen by chance. The international community through the strong pressure mounted by the US and its allies prevailed on the military rulers in most African countries to step down and handover the reins of power to democratically elected leaders. Economic and diplomatic sanctions were imposed on some countries in order to effect desirable democratic change in the political systems of those African countries which were stubbornly refusing to democratize their governance systems. Another factor was the poor economic standing of most of these African countries, which were neck-deep in debt to western creditors (London club, paris club,etc) and the Bretton woods institutions(IMF, and the World Bank). With such economic incapacitation, it was not difficult for the US and the western world to influence the dislodgement from power of African military leaders who had become so corrupt and incapable of bailing their countries out of the gallows of poverty and economic adversities. The current democratic African leaders are also spineless because the situation in much of the continent has grown from bad to worse over the years. Several thousands of African youths are braving the Mediterranean sea in futile search for greener pastures in Europe because they could not see any hope for survival in their countries.

How can African leaders that are presiding over bankrupt economies exercise independence in the face of grinding poverty, hardship, diseases, and miseries that are ravaging their populations? Most of these African leaders are battling problems they inherited from preceding administrations; they are overwhelmed with challenges of coping with the broader implications of the crises of global capitalism which has made fewer countries extremely rich at the expense of other countries. Africa is hard hit by the current policy of President Trump's administration in the US to cut foreign aid and assistance to developing countries.

Unless and until African leaders begin to look inwards for their countries' economic salvation, their countries would keep finding it difficult to achieve autonomous development. Africa is blessed with natural resources but still lacking the technological know-how. The time has come for the continent to prioritize education of his citizens above other priorities. Global economy is knowledge-driven. The developmental feat of the Asian tigers should be replicated in Africa. Japan, India, South Korea, Singapore, etc are developed and still developing because of the high premium they placed on the education of their people. If African leaders would be independent of foreign influences and controls, they must ensure that their countries' economies are sufficiently independent and are productive enough to support their populations.

However, there is no country in the world that is an Island to itself. Countries do engage in mutually beneficial economic exchanges and transactions; that is partnership, and that is not dependency. African leaders should partner with the rest of the world on mutually beneficial terms. For this to happen, the right economic foundations in Africa must be emplaced by its leaders.

3.0. The long-term implications of African leaders' dependence on foreign powers

The implications of African leaders' dependence on foreign powers for the continent are not farfetched. First, such dependency would in the long-run rob Africa of its independence. Developmental Policies which ought to address the developmental needs of Africans would then have to be vetted by foreign powers, and every foreign policy initiative of African leaders would be submitted to such foreign powers for consideration and concurrence before such initiative is implemented. Dependent development has never really benefitted any country. Dependency paralyzes autonomous initiative for development and hinders industrialization as we are seeing in much of Africa. Second, dependency empowers Africa's benefactors whilst enforcing the conditions that would keep Africa in permanent dependency. The creditor is master to the borrower, just as the debtor is the servant to the lender. Africa's vision to attain development does need the concurrence of any superpower but the determination of its leadership to implement policies that would institutionalize structures that harmonize and utilize the creativity and productivity of African people for the overall development of the continent. Third, Africa's dependence on the rating agencies that prioritizes sterile statistics above actual human development is one of the reasons why Africa's growth statistics are not reflective of the objective conditions of Africans and their continent. African leaders should begin a process that indigenizes development to suit the basic requirements of their people, and to develop at their own pace. Fourth, the economies of African countries as currently configured cannot create that independence that African leadership ought to manifest and which it earnestly craves but which has remained elusive. This is so because African countries' economies lack requisite intra-Africa linkages and integration. The level of intra-African trade and commerce is inexcusably low because the economies of African countries are not complementary as most of the countries in the continent are still shamefully producers of raw materials meant for Asian , European and American industries. Industries are folding up in Africa because the industrial products being produced are not competitively priced, and thus lack intra-African patronage.

In conclusion, all the foregoing disempowering traits of African economies are some of the factors inhibiting against Africa's experience of true freedom in all ramifications. African leaders should not be expected to assert the foreign policies of their countries without encumbrances, when their economies are enmeshed in debt and their people are ravaged by poverty. But, there is hope on the horizon evident in the ongoing effort of the African Union (AU) to reposition Africa's economy through the creation of a single unified market for its 1.3 billion people. It was reported that 54 of Africa's 55 countries including Nigeria have signed the general agreement for the establishment of a continent-wide free trade area which was launched in Niger on Sunday, 7th July, 2019. At the launch were several African heads of state. This initiative represents an estimated market of $3.4 trillion which would boost economic development in Africa.[1] An economically empowered Africa will be an assertive continental voice at the global stage for the people of the continent.

Endnotes

1. Andrew Meldrum, "African Leaders to launch Continent-wide Free Trade Zone". https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/african-leaders-to-launch-continent-wide-free-trade-zone accessed7th July, 2019 at 7.19pm.

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