book review of Assessing George W. Bush’s Africa Policy
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Published in:
African and Asian Studies

Publication date:
2010

Document version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Citation for published version (APA):

*Assessing George W. Bush’s Africa Policy and Suggestions for Barack Obama and African Leaders* is edited by Professor Abdul Karim Bangura, a distinguished scholar and researcher at Howard University. The 283-page volume is a highly ambitious endeavor, in which the contributors, also well-known experts in their respective fields, have examined a number of critical issues that have shaped the relationship between the United States and Africa in recent years.

According to Dr. Bangura, the edited volume is the second part in a series organized by the African Studies and Research Forum of the Association of Third World Studies, mainly in order to facilitate dialogue between Africa and the United States. This work takes a number of different viewpoints on the George W. Bush administration and has quite a few recommendations for President Barack Obama and his team, as they begin to engage the African continent. The text is divided into thirteen chapters, which examine a diversity of topics, including the US President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR); the war on terrorism; education assistance; environmental policy; African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA); and the United States-Africa Command (AFRICOM), among others.

Chapter 1 of the volume begins with Professor Peter Dumbuya’s interesting overview of US-African relations in recent years. In it, he explains that the two terms of the George W. Bush presidency were highly complex, combining a very realist approach alongside that of what has been called a “compassionate conservative” approach. The continent saw its version of the “war on terror”, along with humanitarian efforts, such as those to help in the struggle against HIV/AIDS. In the end, regardless of Mr. Bush’s legacy elsewhere, the author reminds us that ex-President Bush had an 80% approval rating among Africans at the end of his tenure in 2008, when, at the same time, his support at home was only in the teens percentage-wise.

In the second chapter, Professor Jack Mangala focuses on the emergence of the United States Africa Command, or AFRICOM. Here, the author makes it quite clear most Africans did not appreciate the way AFRICOM was put together from the beginning. Indeed, individual African governments and the African Union (AU) have had little input in the emergence of the US Africa Command. Therefore, according to Dr. Mangala, there is no “organic” link between US priorities and African ones. Furthermore, some Africans feared that AFRICOM and the increased militarization of relations with the continent would divert scarce resources from traditional development and humanitarian activities.

Professor Abdul Karim Bangura, in chapter 3, continues the overall argument that there is a growing general trend of militarization in US-African relations, began under Bush II, related to the “war on terror”. However, the author states that in securing vital national interests, the George W. Bush administration’s overall objective in the “war on terror” on the continent was focused more on 1) securing Africa’s strategic natural resources for the United States, and 2) countering China’s growing influence in the region, than it is about fighting terrorists. Dr. Bangura concludes that “in pursuing the “War on Terrorism”, the Obama Administration must rethink the United States’ policy within a framework of an equitable partnership with the African continent, (p. 80). Developing such an understanding seems crucial, if Africa-US relations are to flourish during the Obama presidency.
Chapter 4, by Professor Ishmael Munene of Northern Arizona University, examines an issue that is commonly overlooked, i.e. education initiatives, which have frequently taken a back seat to fighting HIV/AIDS and terrorism in recent years. In his excellent chapter, Dr. Munene clearly points out that the United States and Africa have a clear mutual interest in promoting education, not only at the primary level but also in a much more holistic manner, including secondary and tertiary education as well. This chapter provides quite an impressive roundup of the US African Education Initiative (AEI). The AEI was a Bush II program that began in 2002 and is due to expire in 2010. The author further recommends that the AEI should be continued and stresses three priorities in promoting education: access, quality, and retention. Yet, the AEI seems difficult to assess, since the AEI is so new and spreads across 40 countries, each with relatively unique programs of their own. Overall, Munene’s specific suggestions to the Obama administration are three-fold: 1) the AEI should allow African countries to have considerably more ownership in developing their programs, and 2) there should be a better understanding of the strategic role of higher education in creating self-sustaining capacity building, and 3) AEI has to help African countries shift their domestic priorities to focus increasingly on education.

Professor Iheanyi N. Osundu centers chapter 5 on how human behavior impacts the environment in Africa. He focuses on several points not traditionally assumed as being related to the environment. One of the most interesting dilemmas posed by the author is the issue of landmines, as devices not only meant to kill and injure countless thousands each year, but that they are also a major factor impacting the overall level of agricultural productivity in former war zones. In Angola, for example, 1 in every 470 people are amputees, who have been injured from ordinance or landmines left over from the decades of conflict in that country. The problem is that de-mining is very expensive and dangerous to undertake, with a $10 anti-personnel landmine costing up-to $1000 to remove! Given the fact that millions of these devices litter the African landscape, dealing with their consequences is a long, uphill task in itself. Additionally, two other factors devastating the environment are illegal mining and logging, issues that are especially impacting the Congo Basin. Concerning mining, the Eastern DR Congo, to cite one region, is beset with countless illegal mines. There, various warring factions force local populations to dig or extract valuable commodities such as diamonds, gold, or colton to finance their ability to continue fighting a conflict that has so far killed over an estimated 5 million people. Their mining “techniques” are devastating for the environment. Furthermore, these precious metals and stones bring in hundreds of millions of dollars each year to those exporting them, with virtually no benefit to the local populations. Also, illegal logging, or even logging in general, is having a devastating impact on the local and global environments as far as the forests are concerned.

Professor Osundu further argues that, so far, 80% of African forests have been cut down. This undermines biodiversity and deeply impacts the global climate. While logging goes virtually unregulated in places such as the DR Congo and the Central African Republic at the moment, corruption and poor law enforcement hinders slowing illegal logging in many others. Also, he points out that the Obama administration must recognize the interconnectedness of the planet and commit to energy and resource conservation as a critical goal in the United States.

The African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) may be increasing trade between the US and Africa, but it has done very little to alleviate poverty, according to Professor
Kelly Harris in chapter 6. Unfortunately, AGOA is apparently not helping to build vibrant economies in Africa by jump-starting them with a push of trade with the US. Since the scheme was opened up to include almost all African exports by ex-President George W. Bush's administration, it has become even more apparent that AGOA is primarily a product of US interests, mainly to secure access to oil and other precious resources. Petroleum, the author adds, represents over 90% of US imports from Africa under AGOA. Indeed, the program's biggest enthusiasts have been oil companies and other American corporate interests.

Perhaps rightly, J.-P. Afam Ifedi (chapter 7) calls the former U.S. President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief, or PEPFAR, as the “greatest legacy” concerning Africa. The author is one of the few in the edited volume to suggest that a policy from the Bush II administration should be lauded for its accomplishments, continued, and even expanded in coming years. Dr. Ifedi provides a solid recommendation for Obama for strengthening the US role in combating HIV/AIDS. This use of soft power truly increases American legitimacy in Africa. However, with 80% of the PEPFAR program going to post-contraction care and research to create better antiretroviral drugs, the author contends that perhaps the Obama administration should focus more on prevention, a subject that caused significant moral problems for George W. Bush's compassionate conservative allies.

Professor Walter Hill, in chapter 8, examines the impact of genetically-modified organisms (GMOs) on Africa. Unfortunately, he gives such a balanced assessment, providing time to both sides of the argument about the impact of GMOs, that it is difficult to get any specific suggestions out of his chapter for President Obama. It would seem clear that the high costs of GMOs, their possible negative impact on some critical African biospheres, and the potential of being locked out of key European and Asian export markets, would make GMOs unfeasible for much of Africa. In addition, Hill agrees that this green revolution may not be the miracle that Africa needs to end pervasive hunger in parts of the continent.

Professor Guy Martin (chapter 9), in his excellent discussion, follows one of the main arguments presented in the book: that US policies toward Africa should follow a realist line. Martin emphasizes that US actions on the continent defend and promote American economic interests first and foremost. The recent militarization of US relations with Africa, through AFRICOM and the “war on terror”, brings Martin into an agreement with several of his co-contributors or co-authors that this increased attention is an indication that US interests in Africa are on the rise. He points to the US National Intelligence Council 2015 estimate that in several years about 25% of US oil imports will come from Africa as an example of the increasing American strategic interests in the continent. However, it is important to note that military and economic aid to the region remains dwarfed by other areas of the world such as Asia, the Middle East, or Latin America. As far as the Obama administration is concerned, Martin predicts continuity with the Bush administration’s policy, with its focus on the “war on terror”, securing access to mineral resources, and the containment of China. Yet, on a more positive note, perhaps the new US leadership on Africa, in the Obama administration’s State Department, might mean a new regard on several humanitarian fronts, including Darfur and the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

The last four chapters were focused on contemporary US foreign policy toward Kenya, Liberia, Ghana, and Sudan. In chapter 10, for example, Professor Mueni wa Muiu very usefully utilizes the case of Kenya to ask if US foreign policy towards Africa will change
under the Obama administration, or maintain its historic low profile. Professor George Klay Kieh, Jr., a very well-known and distinguished political scientist, provides an extremely well-written and researched essay in chapter 11. In it, he gives an excellent assessment of the Bush II administration's role during and after the second Liberian civil war. He hopes that a more holistic approach to post-conflict assistance can help Liberia down the road to a durable peace and a flourishing democracy, away from the big men/women of recent times. Ivor Agyeman-Duah, a diplomat-cum-Journalist excellently used chapter 12 to examine Ghana, with a particular focus on the Millennium Challenge Account (MCA) that was put in place under former President George W. Bush; readers will benefit tremendously from Agyeman-Duah's expert knowledge of Ghanaian affairs. Dr. Ngozi C. Kamalu, in chapter 13, provides an excellent overview of the dual religious and humanitarian crises in the Sudan. This final chapter too provides very useful information given the complicated relationship between the US and Sudan under the Bush II administration.

This book explores perhaps some of the most important subjects in the relationship between the United States and Africa in the past decade. However, there are two major issues that draw away from this useful and influential work. First, a number of the authors try to tackle too many issues at the same time. Nonetheless, for the academic and policy communities, the volume provides excellent resources for further research. Second, it is hoped that, in a revised edition of the publication, the in-text references in some chapters should have corresponding full citations in the bibliography at the back of the book, while some of the most fascinating materials should provide more complete references. Overall, this edited volume provides a timely and also very interesting look into the numerous complex issues facing the United States and Africa today; the editor and the contributors should be commended for making the volume available and promptly.

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