

Encircling Empire: Obama's Scramble for Africa

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In-depth Report: [NATO'S WAR ON LIBYA](#)

Special thanks for leads and commentary that were useful for this report goes to [Crossed Crocodiles](#), a website devoted to Africa and U.S.-African relations.

This report – the last Encircling Empire Report for 2013 – is fairly long given that it provides detail on a relatively comprehensive pattern of recent events which, taken together, paint a portrait of what the new scramble for Africa means for the U.S. It is sometimes a very disturbing portrait, at other times comical for the excessive insincerity of the speakers, and in some instances quite underwhelming when the true structural weaknesses of U.S. empire come into view.

Once again the U.S. finds itself in over its head, with much in the way of promises but little to offer, and a great many threats and impositions put in place. The ideal objective for the U.S. is to get African nations to administer themselves for U.S. capital, and to rework systems of governance so that they may block access to Chinese, Brazilian, Russian and other influences. In doing so, the U.S. will look for anything that can drive a wedge between African leaders and powers competing against the U.S., and any lever to undermine African leaders who do not comply with U.S. wishes.

As the U.S. exhausts itself, and nears the end of its hegemonic cycle, it seems to be reencountering an earlier, older version of itself when it was still ascending. Here we see a very similar pattern of intervention, investment, and political reengineering that marked the early phase of U.S. expansion in the Caribbean, Central America, and the Pacific in the last decades of the 19th-century, when the U.S. became the “new empire,” as historian Walter LaFeber explained in [his book](#). This time, however, the old “new empire” is met by a shadow, another “[new imperialism](#)” that became prominent in characterizing late British empire this time, the rise of a hollow British imperial “humanitarianism,” and the first scramble for Africa. It is not a question of mere repetition, however: as a cycle, some elements appear to be repeated, but the conditions and context under which that superficially apparent repetition occurs are radically different.

This report effectively consists of several articles bundled into one, most dealing with Obama's Africa tour in late June-early July, and others ranging from the drone war and U.S. military installations across Africa, to AFRICOM military exercises, to gay rights, the recent elections in Zimbabwe, the CIA's conversion of Libya into a site for arming rebels in Syria, and the continuum between Bush and Obama in Africa. The sections/articles within also range from agriculture, to privatization, trade, governance, human rights, and militarization.

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On a beach in Ghana, a discarded wrapper for "Obama Biscuits," produced in Ghana to mark Obama's visit in 2009.

This report is for the period from *June 26, 2013* to *August 10, 2013*. This and previous issues have been archived on a dedicated site — please see: [ENCIRCLING EMPIRE](#). For frequent updates, please "like" [our Facebook page](#).

"The countries that cooperate with us get at least a free pass," acknowledged a senior U.S. official who specializes in Africa but spoke on condition of

anonymity to avoid retribution. “Whereas other countries that don’t cooperate, we ream them as best we can.” The official said the administration of former president George W. Bush took the same approach in Africa. Many U.S. diplomats and human-rights groups had hoped Obama would shift his emphasis in Africa from security to democracy, but that has not happened, the official added. “There’s pretty much been no change at all,” the official said. “In the end, it was an almost seamless transition from Bush to Obama.” (Whitlock, 2013/4/13)

U.S. Militarization of Africa

Reflecting on this synthesizing statement of U.S. Africa policy – “The countries that cooperate with us get at least a free pass. Whereas other countries that don’t cooperate, we ream them as best we can” – [Crossed Crocodiles](#) (CC) sees this as the essence of U.S. foreign policy, one which has “escalated over time, particularly in the 1980s under Reagan, and with the proliferation of pointless wars this century begun by Bush and expanded under Obama. I say pointless, because although there may have been objectives, they were not related to the means used to achieve them, or to the eventual outcomes, in any coherent way. The US has tried to solve political problems with the brute force of military power... US policy in Africa continues this pattern. The destruction of Libya is the most aggressive recent example.” Giving a graphic example of the pervasive nature of the militarization of U.S. policy toward Africa, CC provides a link to the following [interactive map](#) showing what is known of the current U.S. military presence in Africa:

[View Larger Map](#)

In addition CC points to [a report in Public Intelligence](#) with a breakdown, accompanied by aerial photos, of each of the drone bases in Africa (down at the time of writing, thus an archived copy is presented instead).

Thus when it comes to the U.S.’ much vaunted policies aimed at “democracy promotion,” which translates into violent regime change when enforced against target nations, the U.S. is content to give a “free pass” to those who aid it in its “reaming”:

“In Djibouti, on the Horn of Africa, President Ismail Omar Guelleh has ruled unchallenged over his tiny country since 1999 by marginalizing political opponents and confining journalists. Still, the U.S. government has embraced Guelleh as a friend because he has allowed the Pentagon to build [a major counter-terrorism base on his territory](#). In Uganda, where Yoweri Museveni has served as president for 27 years, U.S. officials have objected to the persecution of gay men and lesbians and other human-rights abuses. But Washington has kept up a generous flow of foreign aid. It also [pays Uganda to send troops to war-torn Somalia](#) and [lead a regional hunt for Joseph Kony](#), the brutal leader of the Lord’s Resistance Army. In Kenya, U.S. diplomats warned there would be unspecified “consequences” if the country elected a fugitive from the International Criminal Court as its new president. Kenyans did so anyway, and the Obama administration has hesitated to downgrade relations because it needs help on counter-terrorism. Human-rights groups have also accused the U.S. government of holding its tongue about political repression in Ethiopia, [another key security partner in East Africa](#).”

Obama Scrambles Africa

On Wednesday, June 26, 2013, Obama began [a tour](#) of Africa lasting almost six days, going

from Senegal to South Africa and then Tanzania. As is to be expected, the corporate media contactors that followed Obama, such as the aptly named [Associated Press](#), minimized the fact that the tour was meant, first of all, to promote the business interests of select corporations, some of whom are also leading defence contractors—thus it is only at the end of its article that the AP briefly mentions that top “U.S. business leaders were traveling with Obama.” The AP also gave dimensions to the prize in Obama’s eyes: a continent which had six of the world’s ten fastest-growing economies in 2012, and where China’s trade with Africa (\$200 billion per year) more than doubles U.S. trade with Africa (\$95 billion per year). Meanwhile [others](#) noted that the U.S. accounts for only 10% of foreign investment in Africa. Add to that the growing presence of [Brazil in Africa](#): “In the past decade, Africa-Brazil trade has soared by 500 per cent to reach US\$9 billion....With 37 embassies in 54 African countries, Brazil has the fifth largest number of embassies in Africa after the United States, China, France and Russia”. Yet, by overthrowing Libya’s Muammar Gaddafi in a bloody intervention, thus eliminating one key competitor for influence, Obama clearly hoped to reap the rewards.

Obama went to Africa to especially [open markets to the U.S.](#): “Washington is also looking to extend the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) when it expires in 2015. The deal, signed into law by former President Bill Clinton in 2000, slashes customs duties for African countries building free markets.” On his trip, Obama made it quite clear that AGOA has been [great for U.S. corporations](#): “Our exports to Africa have tripled — with Caterpillar, for example, from my home state of Illinois, selling mining trucks to Mozambique. Boeing is selling airplanes to Kenya — Kenya Airways. American-made solar-powered water treatment systems sold in Senegal and Cameroon, they’re supporting jobs back in Pennsylvania.” (Some may wish to recall that Caterpillar, from Obama’s home state, was locked out of investments in Libya under Gaddafi.)

In terms of Obama’s Africa mission, under the White House’s listed priority of “[increasing U.S. trade and investment](#),” a spokesperson wrote: “We are redoubling our efforts to create an environment that enables greater trade, and investment, through encouraging regional integration, legal reforms that break down barriers to the free flow of goods, and services, greater transparency, and anti-corruption measures”. The second listed priority, “[investment in strong democratic institutions](#),” makes the same points, if one is lucid enough to not indulge belief in fairy-tales of what democracy means, in this context: governments “open” to U.S. capitalist interests, and “accountable” to the U.S. and its allies. The “freedom” is about free trade, not anti-oppression. To carry through its plans, the U.S. is trying to build [a cadre of new African leaders](#) via its Young African Leaders Initiative (YALI), which is designed to build and maintain connections between them and the U.S. Put simply, this is a U.S. engineered plan for the governance of Africa, as administered by the U.S.’ African allies in favour of U.S. interests. This is not so dissimilar from late 19th-century U.S. expansionism in the Caribbean, and particularly in Cuba in the latter decades of the 19th and first decades of the 20th century. In Africa, the U.S. may “find” its new Cuba—and that is something that can *cut* both ways.

Neoliberal Restructuring: Getting Out of Our Way

At a meeting with business leaders in Tanzania on July 1, Obama made it clear that any obstacles in the way of foreign investment would need to be either torn down or restructured to facilitate foreign investors. [His words](#) were straightforward enough:

We know that it has to become easier to do business in Africa. This is something that we had extensive conversations about, and all of you know this better than anyone — you’ve figured out how to work around the constraints, but we need to tear down these constraints. It still takes way too long — too many documents, too much bureaucracy — just to start a business, to build a new facility, to start exporting. And one of the useful comments that came during our discussion is, if we’re going to, for example, build a lot of power around Africa, we can’t have a seven-year timeframe for building a power plant. We’ve got to move. Things have to go faster. And government can have an impact on that — for good or for ill.

So as part of our partnership for growth, we’re working with countries like Tanzania and Ghana to make sure rules and regulations are encouraging investment, not scaring it away. And, by the way, if we can synchronize regionally between countries so that there is some standardization of how business gets done, that’s helpful too, because then people don’t have to try to figure out and unlock a different bureaucracy and a different system, different paperwork for even the most routine tasks.

We know that strengthening good governance is good business as well — and this is something that I’ve been emphasizing throughout my tour with leaders and with citizens in Senegal and South Africa, and now in Tanzania. No one should have to pay a bribe to start a business or ship their goods. You should have to hire somebody’s cousin who doesn’t come to work just to get your job — get your business done. You shouldn’t have to do that. (Applause.)

So as part of our global effort against corruption, we’re working with countries across Africa to improve governance, enhance open government, uphold the rule of law. Because trade will flow where rules are predictable and investment is protected.

This is, in effect, a litany of U.S. capitalists’ complaints about getting into African markets. From my research, they strongly echo U.S. complaints about the cost of doing business in Libya, and the result being that U.S. firms often found themselves barred from entry, and the U.S. Embassy growing increasingly angry. That these obstacles matter to Obama, Obama himself makes very clear.

General Electric’s Salesman of the Year Award Goes to Barack Obama

This brings us to “Power Africa”. Speaking about the generation of [electricity](#), Obama declared: “it’s the connection needed to plug Africa into the grid of the global economy. You’ve got to have power”. Elsewhere Obama exclaimed: “It’s [a win for the United States](#) because the investments made here, including in cleaner energy, means more exports for the U.S. and more jobs in the U.S.”

As [Forbes](#) noted, “providing that power could be a real boon to American (and global) companies focused on power generation and energy management”—as Obama stated frankly, “my own nation will benefit enormously if you reach full potential”. Traveling with Obama to Africa was the [CEO of General Electric, Jeffrey Immelt](#), “who until early this year chaired the president’s Council on Jobs and Effectiveness”.

In addition to Immelt, and Bill Gates, [other investors](#) in “Power Africa” listed by the White House [include](#):

“Heirs Holdings, the investment vehicle of Nigerian tycoon Tony Elumelu,

which has pledged \$2.5 billion. Aldwych International, a Dutch-backed company, plans a 400 mw wind power project in Kenya. And then there's Symbion Power, which is run by Lord Richard Westbury, a former officer with the British special forces, and which counts former U.S. Ambassador Joseph Wilson (husband of ousted CIA agent Valerie Plame) as a director. Symbion has done a handful of power projects in Iraq, and recently completed a 55 mw diesel-powered electricity project in Tanzania".

Obama's promotion of his "Power Africa" plan, whose major beneficiary will in fact be [General Electric \(GE\)](#), along with [several other corporations](#) following, has some ambiguities. The funding for the program is not as impressive as one might think, nor a "sure thing". While the private sector will supposedly invest \$9 billion, Obama's pledge is \$7 billion in U.S. government funding, even though it would cost at least \$300 billion to bring electricity to "Sub-Saharan" Africa—and even though out of that mere \$7 billion the U.S. government is only sure that it can provide just about \$300 million. The [rest of the funds](#) do not seem to be especially rewarding for Africans themselves: "the US Export-Import Bank [is] to provide \$5 billion, the Overseas Private Investment Corporation to give \$1.5 billion, and the Millennium Development Corporation to offer \$1 billion. Yet these are mostly likely loan guarantees where, say, if Tanzania wishes to purchase turbines worth \$50 million, the US-based funds guarantee the loan". The majority of Obama's plan thus consists of loan guarantees and the assumption of credit risks, to back GE and others.

In other words, U.S. companies and banks will reap the rewards, while Africans will reap debt. Moreover, with more electric power, African markets made "free" are then turned into dependent and open outlets for U.S. goods. As [Obama](#) himself said: "We also then have somebody to trade with and sell iPods to, and airplanes, and all kinds of good stuff".

How does Obama's "Power Africa" plan compare to what China is doing in Africa? China has already been investing [tens of billions](#) of dollars in the African energy sector, with over \$4 billion spent just in Ethiopia alone.

Food Security (for Transnational Capitalism)

One part of Obama's African tour involved further spearheading the controversial agricultural plan known as the "New Alliance for Food Security and Nutrition". In Senegal, [a roundtable of the New Alliance](#) was held, including members of Obama's delegation such as the head of USAID, the director of the Peace Corps, a senior member of the National Security Council, the U.S. ambassador to Senegal and the CEO of the Millennium Challenge Corporation. During the [roundtable](#), one of the participants wrote, "we spoke with high-level African officials from West African countries and regional institutions, as well as with key investors to discuss opportunities for further investment. We also highlighted U.S. food security initiatives across the continent and urged continued progress on reforms that would boost sustainable private investment in agriculture".

To understand more about the New Alliance, see the following articles (extracts included below):

Monbiot, George. (2013/6/10). "[Africa, let us help – just like in 1884: From the Conference of Berlin to today's G8, 'helping' Africans looks suspiciously like grabbing their resources.](#)" *The Guardian*, June 10:

Neoliberalism, land grabs, and seed monopolies, all in the name of humanitarian salvation:

“One of the stated purposes of the Conference of Berlin in 1884 was to save Africans from the slave trade. To discharge this grave responsibility, Europe’s powers discovered, to their undoubted distress, that they would have to extend their control and ownership of large parts of Africa....One of the stated purposes of the G8 conference, hosted by David Cameron next week, is to save the people of Africa from starvation. To discharge this grave responsibility, the global powers have discovered, to their undoubted distress, that their corporations must extend their control and ownership of large parts of Africa. As a result, they will find themselves in astonished possession of Africa’s land, seed and markets.”

Chandrasekaran, Kirtana, & Bassey, Nnimmo. (2013/6/7). [“G8’s new alliance for food security and nutrition is a flawed project: The UK government claims to be committed to ending hunger yet supports a scheme that, billed as good for Africa, is anything but.”](#) *The Guardian*, June 7.

....So it’s good news, right? Sadly, no. The new alliance prioritises unprecedented access for multinational companies to resources in Africa. To access cash under the initiative, African governments have to make far-reaching changes to their land, seed and farming policies.

Statement by Civil Society in Africa (2013). [Modernising African Agriculture: Who Benefits?](#) May 15.

Opening markets and creating space for multinationals to secure profits lie at the heart of the G8 [“New Alliance for Food Security and Nutrition in Africa”] and AGRA [Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa] interventions. Both initiatives are built on the basis of public-private partnerships (PPPs) with the large multinational seed, fertiliser and agrochemical companies setting the agenda, and states and institutions (like the G8, World Bank and others) and philanthropic institutions (like AGRA and others) establishing the institutional and infrastructural mechanisms to realise this agenda. Multinational corporations like Yara, Monsanto, Syngenta, Cargill and many others want secure markets for their products in Africa. In the first place, security means protection of their private ownership of knowledge in the form of intellectual property (IP) protection. Across Africa, so-called ‘harmonisation’ of laws and policies are underway to align African laws and systems with the interests of these multinationals.

Obama’s Gay Rights Crusade in Senegal: “No we can’t”



Obama as Indiana Jones, while touring the Sphinx in Egypt in 2009.

That colonial attitudes walk alongside the U.S. media and the president, is a fact that was also on exhibit during this tour. Outlets such as the Christian Science Monitor were not shy about revealing a certain patronizing condescension towards the African continent as a whole. As congratulations for “progress,” the continent “[deserves a slap on the back](#).” One rarely finds such belittling and superior attitudes when U.S. “journalists” write about white settler nations. Later, the CSM would go further—too far—with an atrocious and abusively ignorant headline that likened social justice and indigenous ownership of indigenous resources to “apartheid”: “[Is Zimbabwe preparing its own version of apartheid?](#)”

Perhaps more abominable was Obama’s strident condescension in bordering on a proclamation of himself as the good shepherd of [South Africa’s future and its young people](#): “There’s no question, Africa’s on the move, but it’s not moving fast enough. We’ve got more work to do because Africans must not be left behind. That’s where you come in, young people.”

Little was as condescending and ill-considered as Obama’s unsolicited lecture on gay rights in Senegal, which largely backfired. This, supposedly, was meant to show how-unlike China—the U.S. is concerned about more than just business, but also human rights. That this means propagating moral absolutes without regard to local social processes does not bother Obama, now posing as humanitarian, now posing as if he commanded the moral high ground on gay rights when the U.S. is itself by no means a leader in gay rights, especially not in the West, and not even in North America itself for that matter. Human rights, and in this case the gay variant, is the lever that the U.S. has chosen to somehow try to muscle China out of African markets. This episode was not some quirky detour to flash gay rights when the U.S. Supreme Court issued a limited new ruling on gay marriages, rather it is [a matter of U.S. foreign policy](#): “In a December 2011 memorandum, Obama instructed federal agencies to promote gay rights overseas.”

Senegalese President Macky Sall [denied that gays were persecuted](#) by the state. Far from being impressed by Obama’s instructions on governance, the likes of which would not be offered by Chinese diplomats and leaders, Sall “[said](#) it was important for other countries to refrain from imposing their values beyond their borders”—and he added: “We don’t ask the Europeans to be polygamists, We like polygamy in our country, but we can’t impose it in yours. Because the people won’t understand it, they won’t accept it. It’s the same thing.” Sall explained that Senegalese tend to be very quiet and not very violent—this could be interpreted to mean that in everyday life Senegalese have achieved a modus vivendi, whereby homosexuality happens as a public secret, while the state feels that it is its socially-approved moral duty to enact official laws against homosexuality. Sall also seems to have made the reasonable suggestion that Senegalese society, unlike an amusement park that rushes to acquire the latest ride, will need to cover its own ground in its own time: “I don’t know what will happen in 10 years, because the world changes. It depends on each culture or each civilization. We have to take time. Because people need time to absorb. It’s not something you can have in one day.” ([Full comment, in French.](#))

Here are Sall’s comments in full, at the [press conference with Obama](#), where he also reminded everyone that, unlike in the U.S. for example, Senegal has no death penalty:

Now, on the issue of homosexuality, Mr. President, you did make a long development on this issue. But you said something very important — general principles which all nations could share, and that is the respect for the human being and non-discrimination. But these issues are all societal issues basically, and we cannot have a standard model which is applicable to all nations, all countries — you said it, we all have different cultures. We have different religions. We have different traditions. And even in countries where this has been decriminalized and homosexual marriage is allowed, people don't share the same views.

Senegal, as far as it is concerned, is a very tolerant country which does not discriminate in terms of inalienable rights of the human being. We don't tell anybody that he will not be recruited because he is gay or he will not access a job because his sexual orientation is different. But we are still not ready to decriminalize homosexuality. I've already said it in the past, in our Cabinet meeting it is Senegal's option, at least for the time being, while we have respect for the rights of homosexuals — but for the time being, we are still not ready to change the law.

But of course this does not mean that we are all homophobic. But the society has to absolve these issues. It has to take time to digest them, bringing pressure to bear upon them, on such issues. It is just like the capital punishment. In our country, we have abolished it for many years. In other countries, it is still the order of the day, because the situation in the country requires it. And we do respect the choice of each country. But please be assured that Senegal is a country of freedom and homosexuals are not being prosecuted, persecuted. But we must also show respect for the values and choices of the other Senegalese people.

Sall was the anthropologist here in what [Le Monde](#) called a “clash of cultures,” and Obama, son of an anthropologist, came across as a blundering interventionist. Sall was in fact [praised](#) for his stance by the press: “the front pages of local newspapers on Friday were dominated by talk of the exchange on homosexuality. The newspaper Liberation, for example, praised Sall for his ‘courageous’ stance and, alongside a photo of Obama and Sall, ran a banner headline that played on Obama’s famous campaign slogan: ‘No, we can’t’.” The [New York Times](#) documented a small sample of the ways Obama’s message backfired locally.

NObama in South Africa

Protests against Obama in South Africa started even before he arrived in the country. [Western media](#) reported “hundreds” of protesters went to the U.S. Embassy in one event, seemingly underreporting the number (another source said “[thousands](#)”), and another group protested against Obama’s visit in front of the Parliament in Cape Town where “Obama’s record on human rights and trade relations in Africa were questioned.” Most of the protesters were trade unionists from COSATU, members of the South African Communist Party, and local Muslim activists, among others. The drone war was not far from protesters’ minds either. One was [quoted](#) as criticizing Obama’s attempts to glue himself to Mandela’s legacy: “Mandela valued human life... Mandela would condemn drone attacks and civilian deaths, Mandela cannot be his hero, he cannot be on that list.”

A statement by the [Young Communist League](#) of South Africa/the [South African Communist Party](#), indicated the range of groups protesting against Obama, forming the “[NObama Coalition](#)”:

We as South Africans in the form of the South African Communist Party (SACP), the Young Communist League of South Africa (YCL), the South African Students Congress (SASCO), the Muslim Students Association (MSA), the National Education, Health and Allied Workers Union (NEHAWU), the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), Friend of Cuba Society (FOCUS), Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions against Israel in South Africa (BDS South African), and the World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU), declare our utmost rejection of visit of the United States of America President, Barak Obama to our country.

And they added:

Our rejection is based the USA's arrogant, selfish and oppressive foreign policies, treatment of workers and international trade relations that are rooted in war mongering, neo-liberal super-exploitation, colonial racism and the disregard and destruction of the environment, thus making the realisation of a just and peaceful world impossible.

Among the issues the protesters aimed to highlight, were these six:

1. The championing and maintenance, by the USA, in the militarisation of international relations and co-operation. It is a well-known fact that the USA approaches conflicts in the world through inciting, encouraging as well and championing war, primarily driven by its business interests often masqueraded in the language of defence of human rights. The militarisation of international relations is in the main exemplified by institutions like Africom, NATO, and the continuing double standards around nuclear disarmament that the USA preaches when it comes to countries in the South, whilst continuing to collaborate with on nuclear weapons with Israel.
2. The continued greed in the guzzling of world resources by the USA epitomised by its encouragement and support of its multinational companies that have no regard for the environment, human rights, progressive labour laws etc.
3. The USA's active support and defence of colonial and oppressive regimes. This is the one aspect of USA foreign policy that most exposes its hypocritical character where regimes that support its interest are never opposed; instead they are not only supported but maintained through amongst other things, the USA war machinery. Chief amongst these is Israel, which continues to serve as the USA's frontline state in the Middle-East whilst suppressing and maintaining its racist apartheid policies on Palestinian people. Another example, is the USA's support to Morocco, that is oppressing and colonialally [sic] occupying Western Sahara, and increasingly the support of oppressive regimes like the one in Colombia.
4. The USA's role maintaining the underdevelopment of the African continent and its imperialistic trade relations with African countries.
5. The unjustifiable blockade on Cuba and unfair imprisonment of the Cuban 5.

6. The United States of America is the single largest contributor to global warming which is condemning the world into catastrophic environmental disasters.

The Muslim Lawyers Association of South Africa also called on the government to [arrest Obama](#) on “war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide.”

Absent in all of this is any mention of the U.S. war against Libya, though it is (at best) implied in point #1. Here was an actual war on the African continent, fought by the U.S. and Western allies, an actual imperialist aggression, led by someone who would be on their soil, in their home, and these South African communists cannot even mention Libya’s name. It’s as if Libya was buried in a secret, unmarked, mass grave. Surely one of the most fundamental weapons in the fight against empire ought to at least be *memory*, a critical historical consciousness without mystery closets and forgotten basements.



In the photo of this protester, widely reproduced across the international news media (click on photo to enlarge), one can see some examples of the above in the written sign. Again, no mention of either Libya or Syria. Even stranger, the juxtaposition of contradictory messages, from one that appears to denounce WikiLeaks, to another that praises Julian Assange, from support for Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood to condemnation of the Muslim Brotherhood’s Gulf state financial backers, such as Qatar. The message is all over the place, and seemingly nowhere. Moreover, at least some protesters seemed to fixate on Obama’s skin colour, denouncing him as an “Uncle Tom” and “kitchen boy,” which really seems to miss recognizing him as the product of white American society to begin with.

Even so, at least according to [some](#), these protesters represented a radical difference from the bulk of South Africa’s public opinion. That’s bad news, not least of all for South Africa itself. The “mother of all protests,” in the end proved to be an overstatement of what actually materialized.

Having said that, it is interesting to note that the [University of Johannesburg](#) felt the need to defend its granting of an honorary doctorate to Obama, a gesture that also came with the transformation of the campus into a restricted, militarized zone for the sake of Obama’s visit:

...the university's management insists its honorary doctorate for Obama is a recognition of personal merit rather than an expression of support for United States policies....

UJ deputy vice-chancellor Tinyiko Maluleke said that members of the council and senate, who resoundingly voted in favour of honouring Obama, drew a line between his achievements as president and as an individual. "UJ is giving Obama an honorary doctorate. It is not honouring the policies of the US," said Maluleke. "He's failed in some instances [as president]. We can debate that issue. But let's not say he can't be honoured." Obama's academic achievements alone were enough to honour him, Maluleke said, pointing out that Obama graduated with a law doctorate degree magna cum laude in 1991....

It's not even our event," he said. Obama's address to young leaders on the campus was organised by the US embassy in Pretoria.

U.S. AFRICOM Military Exercise in South Africa

Just about three weeks after Obama departed South Africa, his [military paid a visit to the country](#) starting on July 24: Exercise Shared Accord 2013 involved roughly 700 U.S. and 3,000 South African Defense Force troops. It was the second such exercise between the two. "This particular exercise is aimed at specifically providing collective training for the United States and the South African National Defense Force while building interoperability and mutual understanding between the two armed forces," in the words of South African Major General Ephraim Phako. For his part, Brigadier General Peter L. Corey, deputy commander of U.S. Army Africa, said: "We are here also to learn how [South Africans] conduct their day-to-day operations, airborne operations and peacekeeping operations and in turn show them how we conduct those same operations. We will improve our own skills by training with them in a different environment." The exercise involved "a live-fire operation, airborne and dismounted infantry tactics, a maritime amphibious assault, peacekeeping operations and disaster response. In addition, a humanitarian civic assistance project is scheduled which will provide primary medical, veterinary and optometry assistance to the local population".

The CIA: Converting Libya into a Covert Military Asset

[More details](#), and further confirmation, emerged over the last few weeks about the U.S.' use of its Benghazi post in Libya as part of a CIA operation to illegally send heavy weapons to rebels in Syria. This means that while the Obama administration had claimed it was not arming the rebels, it actually was, in what is in effect an undeclared war that has received no Congressional approval or oversight. This is many months before Obama finally declared, two months ago, the U.S. would "now" arm Syrian insurgents, and that even that would not include "heavy weapons". The pronouncement was superfluous and misleading at best.

In an attempt to further hide information from the public, the Obama administration is now going to unprecedented extremes in trying to clamp down on any potential disclosures from the CIA, [CNN reported](#). Repeated polygraph tests of CIA employees are designed to ensure that no one is speaking to the media, or Congress. What we now know is that Benghazi post was not so much a "diplomatic" mission as it was a CIA hub: of the 35 U.S. employees there on the night that Ambassador Chris Stevens was killed, 21 of them were CIA agents,

including two that were killed with Stevens. The State Department merely provided a [façade for a covert mission](#), conducted without the knowledge or approval of Congress. None have mentioned how similar this is to the essence of Reagan's "Iran-Contra" scandal, which at least was investigated and publicly discussed. The shadow government has come a long way, in becoming ever more shadowy.

For more, see this compelling report:

Zimbabwe: U.S. Rails against a Predicted Electoral Victory

In one of the outstanding ironies of Obama's trip to Africa, he took time out to issue [declarations on Zimbabwe's elections](#), yet to take place at the time. His concern was for "free and fair elections," and Obama's narrative seemed to be at least ten years out of date in describing Zimbabwe as some sort of economic basket case. This was ironic given what was about to take place elsewhere on the African continent, mere days after Obama's "democracy promotion" tour: the military coup in Egypt, which the U.S. tacitly if not directly backed and approved, refusing to issue any criticisms whatsoever. When it comes to mixed signals, Obama is a master of confusion.

In none of the narratives that dominate Western media is there any conceptualization of how Zimbabwe's elections were already pre-rigged by the intervention for foreign powers such as the U.S. and UK in backing Morgan Tsvangirai. No election can be deemed free or fair once one side in an electoral contest is going beyond the rules of the game by courting favour with imperial powers. Once again, imperialism and democracy are fundamentally incompatible, anywhere; states in the periphery, with limited resources, who seek to fight against imperialism sometimes do so also at the expense of the sorts of liberties that liberal idealists imagine should be universal, regardless of context.

One has to wonder how some Western commentators had come to believe that victory was either possible or likely for a [scandal-plagued](#) Morgan Tsvangirai, trailed by [accounts](#) of [corruption](#), widely seen as [losing touch](#) with his base, and up against a ruling ZANU-PF at the helm of popular land reform and indigenization programs. It's not just the New York Times, CNN, and the BBC that have suddenly aired these criticisms of the failures and betrayals by Tsvangirai, it is also former members of the MDC who, while remaining staunchly critical of Robert Mugabe, see [good reason](#) in the landslide victory of the ZANU-PF—and not because of vote rigging. It was [Tsvangirai himself](#), after all, who went on an international tour not long ago, to praise the successes of Zimbabwe and call for an end to sanctions.

Morgan Tsvangirai had denounced the elections from [before the first general votes were ever cast](#), and yet chose to participate nonetheless. Why? (It's not among [the questions](#) the BBC chose to raise.) Indeed, as even critics of Mugabe themselves noted:

It becomes difficult to sustain rigging as the main reason when the pro-opposition Western-funded local elections monitoring body, the Zimbabwe Elections Support Network (ZESN), that had 7000 observers nation wide, tells us that: "in 98% of polling stations there were no incidents of intimidation... at 98% of polling stations, no one attempted to intimidate or influence election officials during counting nor did anyone attempt to disrupt the counting process ...and MDC-T agents signed the V-11 results form at 97% stations at which they were present", which were subsequently posted outside polling

stations.

If there was blatant rigging why sign?

So has there been an upsurge of support for the ruling ZANU-PF? That there indeed was a surge in popular support was registered before the elections in [polls](#) conducted by outside groups, none of which have any love for Mugabe. [One poll](#), conducted by the U.S.' Freedom House in conjunction with the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, found that "support for the Movement for Democratic Change, or M.D.C., the main opposition party, has fallen from 38 percent in 2010 to 20 percent this year among voters who declared a preference....Over the same period, by contrast, support for ZANU-PF grew to 31 percent from 17 percent, the survey found". One of the anti-Mugabe organizations, [Zimbabwe Vigil](#), also said that "the MDC-T would likely lose the next elections". Not even the [friendliest survey](#), by Afrobarometer, as reported by the Voice of America, could conclude that Tsvangirai had good chances of an electoral victory. While Western media usually report that urban areas, such as the capital Harare, are strongholds of support for the MDC, that too is [outdated](#): "in Harare, MDC-T support declined from 50 percent in 2010 to 17 percent, while that for Zanu-PF rose from eight percent to 22 percent". When it came to the referendum for a new constitution that would govern the elections, it was the European Union's foreign policy chief, Catherine Ashton, who declared that the March 16, 2013, vote was "[peaceful, successful and credible](#)," and which saw nearly 95% of voters approving the new constitution—"the referendum passed without incident and turnout was high".

One of the organizations making most of the claims of vote rigging, and most often quoted by Western media, has been the [Zimbabwe Election Support Network \(ZESN\)](#), formed in 2000. At first glance, the credentials of this umbrella body could seem impeccable. However, as keen as it is about "transparency," one might find it curious that the ZESN is somewhat [muted and evasive](#) about its own sources of funding: "The organisation is 100 % donor funded by both local and international funding partners". It does not name those "international funding partners," but there are other ways to find out. U.S. Embassy cables provide some answers. Here is what we know:

- the Zimbabwe Electoral Support Network ([ZESN](#)) [received funding via the U.S.' Economic Support Fund](#), in part to support the ZESN's media activities.
- the U.S. also [listed the ZESN as a partner of USAID's](#) Democracy & Governance program ([also here](#)).
- there is past evidence that the [ZESN coordinated its election monitoring with the U.S. Embassy](#).

While these facts do not necessarily mean that the ZESN simply fabricated its allegations, they do call into question its neutrality and independence, and thus ultimately its credibility.

According to the investigations made by a Zimbabwean newspaper, both the [U.S., EU and UK have continued to fund the opposition](#) even until recently:

The US State Department made two separate deposits into a Crisis in Zimbabwe Coalition local account on January 23, 2013 (US\$264 684) and June 24 2013 (US\$187 978,04) to finance the so-called Feya Feya campaign which is designed to lure voters to the MDC-T under the guise of a campaign for peaceful, free and fair elections.

The EU, on the other hand, through non-governmental organisations, Humanist Institute for Co-operation (Hivos) and International Media Support (IMS) has also availed \$ 736 530.00 to ZESN to carry out a quasi-election monitoring exercise whose intended purpose is to “authenticate” the Western stance that the elections are not free and fair if the MDC-T loses.

The money was paid in four tranches on April 17 2013 (US\$168 258 and US\$199 993-00), July 10, 2013 (US\$168 258) and 11 July 2013 (US\$199 993).

The British Embassy also joined the fray and availed US\$156 000 on January 30, 2013 and US\$161 000 (February 13, 2013) to Crisis in Zimbabwe Coalition for the MDC-T campaign.

But the question remains: why was there such a resounding victory for Mugabe and the ZANU-PF? Here some of Mugabe’s own critics on the left provide [a plausible account](#):

...Mugabe strategically brilliantly re-positioned his party leftward, around land, indigenisation [majority Zimbabwe ownership of companies], economic empowerment and African nationalism. Such re-orientation had also saved him from the 1990s revolts. Mugabe and his ministers, using diamond money and proceeds from indigenisation, dished out seeds, fertiliser, food to rural farmers, recognised informal miners, the informal sector, gave out urban housing stands and projects for youths and women. They vigorously courted the independent African churches and ran an anti-West anti-sanctions campaign. On the eve of elections minister Chombo announced a hugely popular cancellation of council debts which was denounced by MDC. As agriculture recovered driven by 80,000 new tobacco farmers who in 2013 produced 164 million kilograms worth over \$600 million, ZANU-PF’s rural base soared nationwide but especially the agriculturally rich Mashonaland belt, just as that of Tsvangirai and MDC massively shrunk. It is therefore not surprising that the defining character of these elections was that the rural voters, across the country rejected and abandoned Tsvangirai and the MDCs. ZANU-PF’s 40%-strong showing in the towns shows that many urban poor are following. As in Kenya and Zambia, where rising African nationalism triumphed, and the anti-neoliberal revolts across the world, the rural poor rejected MDC as the party most closely identified with austerity and Western puppetry.

Understanding the roots of its victory, the ruling party declared a renewed drive towards [further indigenization of the economy](#) and thus,

“ZANU-PF ran full-page advertisements in newspapers saying its crushing election win was an endorsement of ‘black economic empowerment’ plans that target foreign-owned companies including banks and mines. ‘The people of Zimbabwe have given President Robert Mugabe and ZANU-PF a clear mandate to transform the economy through indigenisation and economic empowerment,’ the party said. ‘Over the next five years, Zimbabwe is going to witness a unique wealth transfer model that will see ordinary people take charge of the economy.’ ZANU-PF has set its eyes on 1,100 foreign-owned firms. It also pledged to leverage mineral reserves ranging from gold to diamonds to platinum to raise money to prop up an economy still emerging

from a decade-long recession”.

As I argued at the outset of this section, this election would be a misunderstood one if we restricted our analysis so that the contest appears as one merely between two local adversaries. An analytical framework that instead sees this as a contest between imperialism and indigenization, in an effort to push the kind of neoliberal agenda that dominated Obama’s Africa tour, is more credible and is attested to by the key actors’ statements themselves. For example, apparently anticipating his defeat, [Tsvangirai was quick to call on his foreign backers](#), or more accurately, to complain that they are not acting visibly to overturn the election:

Prime Minister Morgan Tsvangirai said Friday that he felt betrayed by his erstwhile backers in the West who seem to have resigned given up [sic] on actively seeking to topple President Robert Mugabe and are even prepared to accept his victory in next week’s elections... “For some years, there has been a movement towards democratic precondition. But people get tired of the Zimbabwean issue so what do they do? They resign and they say stability is better than democracy and any form of accommodation of bringing ‘our relations with Zimbabwe by whatever means, we will do it’.”

For his part, in his [first public comments after the election](#) Mugabe stressed *against* which forces this was a huge victory:

“We are very happy that we have dealt the enemy a blow, and the enemy is not (opposition leader Morgan) Tsvangirai. Tsvangirai is a mere part of the enemy. The enemy is he who is behind Tsvangirai. Who is behind the MDC? The British and their allies. Those are the ones who were the real enemies.”

As in Zimbabwe, when it comes to Kenya [Glen Ford](#) says: “The United States is angry because Washington wanted the Kenyan people to elect a different president, one more acceptable to U.S. policymakers. The Americans expected the whole of Kenyan civil society to bend to Washington’s will, and reject the candidacy of Uhuru Kenyatta, simply to please the superpower. When that didn’t happen, it was decided that Kenya must be shunned, despite its past services to U.S. imperialism. [Obama] Skipping Kenya [during his tour] was a warning that more serious repercussions may lurk in the future.”

For past articles of relevance on Zimbabwe, please see:

- [Still Standing: Zimbabwe](#)
- [Zimbabwe: “Keep your money, keep your power, and keep away from us”](#)
- [Stay Up, Zimbabwe: Pan-Africanism, Caribbean Solidarity, and Dignity](#)

The Bush-Obama Africa Continuum

One of the odd coincidences of Obama’s tour is that it coincided with that of former

president George W. Bush. Almost to the end, Obama's handlers seemed to downplay the fact that both Bush and Obama would be in Tanzania at the same time. Eventually, [the two camps joined together](#), with some telling statements and symbolically useful photo ops.



“George, stay a little behind me there, or they’ll think you’re still the President.” Obama and Bush walk to a terrorist attack memorial in Tanzania in July 2013.



“Hey Mich, if you keep this up soon you’re gonna start looking like me too!” The “first ladies” have a get together in Tanzania in July 2013.

As one reporter recounted about the spouses of Bush and Obama:

“their wives were putting on a public display of mutual affection in a discussion moderated by American journalist Cokie Roberts. Mrs. Obama said she wanted to appear with Laura Bush because “I like this woman” and it’s therapeutic to share the challenges of their roles.

“It’s sort of a club, a sorority, I guess,” Mrs. Bush responded.

The two presidents meanwhile joined together for—unsurprisingly—a commemoration of a terrorist attack.

Going back to the opening quote of this report, at least one writer spoke explicitly of the [“Africa continuum”](#) in U.S. foreign policy:

There are also a dizzying number of counterterrorism wars on this continent, all either launched or intensified on Obama’s watch: against Boko Haram in Nigeria; al-Shabaab in Somalia; the Lord’s Resistance Army (Joseph Kony) in the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of Congo and the U.S.-midwifed state of South Sudan; and the Signatories in Blood in Algeria. And this doesn’t count the U.S. efforts to reverse a coup in Mali staged by Amadou Haya Sarog, a commander who received extensive military training in the U.S.

America now has 4,000 to 5,000 troops, mostly in Djibouti and drone bases there and Niger. Questions about the U.S. “militarization” of Africa were raised before and throughout Obama’s three-nation tour.

They rippled through the comments of retired Anglican Bishop Desmond Tutu

in Cape Town on Sunday. Looking squarely at Obama, Tutu said, "Your failure, whether you like it or not, is our failure. We pray that you will be known as having brought peace in all of these places where there is strife ...and no more need for Guantanamo Bay Detention Center."

Obama. Lectured by Tutu. About Gitmo. In Africa. Could there be a better, more prickly example, of how deeply Obama and Bush have become entwined?

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