

Click on the back button of your browser to return to the previous page.

What Obama Should Say in Ghana

Charles Abugre | July 9, 2009

That there is a carnival spirit in Accra, Ghana, ahead of President Barack Obama's visit to this small West African country is to be expected. In March 1998, amidst low approval ratings and sex scandals, the Clintons took Accra by storm. Bill Clinton was mobbed like a rock star and later draped in colorful Ghanaian *kente* cloths. He preached hope for Africa and offered aid, but also apologized for America standing by as hundreds of thousands were slaughtered in the Rwandan genocide. A decade later, President George W. Bush, suffering dismal approval ratings and waging an illegal and murderous war in Iraq, rolled into town. He was received a hero, a savior of Africa from diseases. He danced and was feted. He preached freedom and democracy and promised to increase assistance for HIV/AIDS and malaria, while denying that there was an aggressive American agenda to militarize the continent to secure strategic access to its oil resources.

So what's new about Obama's visit? His trip to Ghana on Friday will be his second trip to Africa in a month, only seven months into his presidency. He went first to Cairo, Egypt, early in June. This sets a record, and signifies that Africa is more than of passing interest. Second, he's the first U.S. president with roots in Africa, making his visit something of a homecoming, whether he sees it that way or not. Being a "son of Africa" carries more meaning to Africans — not least pride, dignity, and hope — than anything he might say or do. Yet what he says about Africa on this trip will carry significantly more meaning for this same reason. Third, Obama isn't just a politician. He has become a brand. He symbolizes hope, "change," the triumph of common humanity, equality of peoples and cultures, and more. But he also signifies pragmatism and the manifestation of American power, as well as U.S. responsibility, and interests.

The Speech

Obama is scheduled to make a major speech in Ghana. He'll address Africans through a Ghanaian audience. What he says will influence the way the world sees Africa and Africa's place in the world. It will reveal his attitude towards a continent much preached to and exploited, whose history is often disregarded. He will address the Ghanaian parliament and by extension African lawmakers. He will visit the slave-holding castles in Western Ghana, addressing the history of slavery and colonization.

His speech should break from the paternalism of his predecessors and yet lays grounds for U.S. interests based on Africa's progress. He should acknowledge the history of U.S.-African relations, for the past shapes the present. His Cairo speech, directed largely at the "Muslim world," would serve as an excellent model. There, he acknowledged that today's realities are rooted in centuries of coexistence as well as in conflicts and wars. To herald a new beginning, he'll need to acknowledge this history and establish a new relationship built on mutual respect and mutual interests. In Cairo, he talked about what Islamic culture had given to the world — timeless poetry, cherished music, elegant calligraphy etc. He talked about an unbreakable bond with Israel based on cultural and historical ties.

The parallels are stark. Nowhere else can one better acknowledge humanity's collective debt in relation to culture, music, multiculturalism, and the coexistence of diverse cultures than in Africa.

If anyone will acknowledge what Africa offers to the rest of the world other than mineral resources, it has to be a "son of Africa." It will be good to hear that Africa doesn't only export poverty and conflict. There's much more in the history between Africa and America to make the bonds "unbreakable."

In Cairo, Obama acknowledged America's wrongs against Iran, especially the role the CIA played in the overthrow of a democratically elected government there.

Similarly, Obama should apologize for the CIA's role in overthrowing the democratically elected government of Ghanaian leader Kwame Nkrumah in 1966 to satisfy Cold War strategic interests. While he's at it, he should apologize for the role the CIA played in removing Patrice Lumumba from power in 1960 and the resulting mess that is today's Democratic Republic of the Congo. Military coups in Africa — the biggest threat to democracy and good governance — were introduced by the CIA and other western intelligence agencies. To not acknowledge that, in a speech focused on good governance, would marginalize Africa's history of struggle for democracy. A good son of Africa couldn't possibly do that.

The Military

Obama should note that the experience Africans have of the military isn't that of protectors, but as instruments of destructive interests — whether the troops are domestic or foreign. Militarization portends interference in democratic processes. The experience of foreign military build-ups portends external intervention to prop up dictators, or meddle with the electoral process, to advance foreign interests. If Obama is serious about democratic and accountable governance to take root in Africa, he'll need to dispel the fear (and the rumor) that the United States is actively militarizing the Gulf of Guinea through increased activities of U.S. naval forces. He should signal loud and clear that he respects the African Union's reluctance to allow the United States to extend its military footprint in Africa, whether by providing landing facilities or hosting an U.S. African Command (AFRICOM) facility. He should dispel the rumour circulating in Ghana, when he speaks to the Ghanaian parliament, to the effect that Ghana's former president John Kufuor had cut a deal allowing U.S. forces on Ghanaian soil.

Debts owed by African nations represent another key problem Obama should address. The limited debt relief delivered by the multilateral debt relief initiative has been virtually reversed by the combined effects of the food and financial crises. Two things need to happen. First, Obama should support the UN's call for a debt servicing moratorium, using U.S. bankruptcy legislation as a guide. This is only fair and would signal that Obama is listening to the UN when it comes to economic matters. Second, there's a crying need for a structural solution. This should be in the form of an independent debt arbitration panel, operating under UN auspices, to mediate between debtors and creditors rather than the current system, in which debtors are totally at the mercy of creditors. This is necessary for a stable international system benefiting rich and poor alike.

Obama must continue to emphasize the personal responsibility of African leaders and African people. He should call on the continent's leaders to do more with what they have, mobilize more resources from within, stamp out corruption and live less lavishly.

Above all he should remind himself and us all that the winds of change that began in Accra in 1957, sweeping across the African continent, and then suppressed for several decades, may well be on the rise again. Who could understand this better than Barack Hussein Obama?

Foreign Policy In Focus (<http://www.fpif.org/>) contributor Charles Abugre is a Ghanaian economist and the policy director of Christian Aid. The views expressed in this article should not be attributed to Christian Aid.

Click on the back button of your browser to return to the previous page.