

For four years, our son of a bitch was in the White House

The saying “He may be a son of a bitch, but he’s our son of a bitch” is often credited to the celebrated American President Ronald Reagan. He was said to have responded with that statement when asked about why America was propping up dictator Mobutu Sese Seko against the will of the people of Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of the Congo). Although that statement has been applied to many other leaders as it has been [“the soundtrack of our \[American\] foreign policy for a century,”](#) it has informed the structural relationship between America (Western Europe, too) and Africa since independence in the mid-20th century, the only exception being the soon-to-come-to-an-end Trump administration.

American foreign policy towards Africa has generally been a two-pronged –if not bipolar – approach. On the one hand is callous militarism that appears to be fixated, on maintaining spheres of geo-strategic influence for raw material exploitation and consumer markets, both at the behest of corporate interests.

Instability (wars) or stability may be tools for achieving these foreign policy objectives, as circumstances dictate. In the wake of independence in most African countries, this militarism was justified as an outcome of the Cold War between the West and the Soviet Union as they attempted to outdo each other in the search for spheres of influence. As such, the Cold War was the cradle of the “sons of a bitches” some of whom happily presumed themselves bastards, seeing no insult in it as long as it serves their interest for power.

American foreign policy is designed to be bipolar, however. Following the fall of the soviet empire, the 1990s brought change in form rather than substance. The victor couldn’t

contain the triumphalist urge to spread democracy and capitalism, as it understood them, around the world. At any rate, misguided “democratisation” and ruinous economic austerity regime embodied this triumphalism.

America’s support for its sons of bitches was superficially conditioned on elections every five years. The result was “elections without democracy” and “constitutions without constitutionalism.” This “democratic process” of periodic elections replaced coups as America’s tool for replacing recalcitrant “bastards”: America would wink and look away as “friendly” bastards stole the elections and intimidate those who opposed them, while imposing sanctions against “unfriendly and uncooperating” for rigging elections. In all, the structure of relations has remained the same since the 1960s, except for the sophistication of the early 1990s “democracy” – meaning regular elections, as defined by those with interest in the outcome of those elections –that only provided cover for laundering the status quo.

Further, a soft power approach of humanitarian assistance for poverty alleviation complements America’s acquiescence in this callous search for “sons of a bitches” at the utter disregard for the African people. Both humanitarian assistance and the promotion of democracy serve two aims. One, the pretence of promoting democracy assures the average Americans that his or her government is a force for good in the world, which protects their innocence from America’s callous foreign policy. Two, America’s perceived good intentions allow it to get away with “collateral damage” that does not require accountability. Therefore, America’s foreign policy shields the innocence of the ordinary American and protects its implementers from moral and legal accountability. It leaves everyone as a moral agent – pure genius!

In addition to the sense of moral agency that America’s soft power gives to Americans back home, the ordinary American receives a psychological shot in the arm at every encounter

with the beneficiaries of America's goodness – "From the American People," USAID's emblazonment reads. At interaction, therefore, the beneficiary gets to interface with the person with whom goodness is imbued, self-evident, and in need of no proof. It's the equivalent of a Christian's much awaited physical encounter with Christ.

However, on the other side of the encounter with generosity personified is hopelessness personified, the kind that cannot be cured with solutions from within. It's a vote of no confidence that conveys the message of ineptness, emotional absence and uselessness of African leaders, which doesn't always correspond to reality, but one that is needed to validate the relationship of charity and exploitation. At once, the contact between the American and African blinds both to the possibility of why poverty persists: that it is the sons of a bitches that preserve the relationship between charity and hopelessness and that without them Africans could elect leaders who would prioritise their needs.

Which is where ignorance and innocence meet. In other words, Africa's crisis of leadership since independence has much to do with a mutually reinforcing structural defect that creates generosity on one side of the relationship and hopelessness on the other. The likes of USAID and DFID, as well as many other democracy-promoting NGOs, represent how that structure expresses itself across Africa: premised on the condescending idea that it is possible to fight poverty and have good governance without necessarily having Africans choose the leaders they want. In other words, generosity is a substitute for African agency. It's a foreign policy that suggests that the wound isn't supposed to be cured because doing so would make bandage unnecessary, yet the survival of bandage manufacturers depends on it.

Therefore, the pretence of promoting democracy and humanitarianism attracts Africans to America's intent – henceforth taken on face value.

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It has been perplexing to many that President Donald Trump has had African supporters. Much of the bewilderment is grounded on the idea that he has been a bad American president, a racist who stokes racial tensions and holds blacks at home and abroad in contempt. This is true. After all, Trump referred to African countries as “shithole”. Trump is a son of a bitch for doing and saying all these things. However, since African independence no American president has made attempts to alter America’s bipolar foreign policy towards Africa, which commits Africa to charity by preventing the people, through diplomatic and military support, from choosing a leader they want. Aside from Gen. Abdel Fattah al-Sissi

of Egypt – for reasons to do with Israel – it is difficult to find any African leader who felt reassured of having Trump’s unfettered support, for instance.

At the explicit policy level, Trump’s foreign policy pivot towards Africa, although [intended as a counterpoint to stem the growing Chinese influence](#), attempted to pivot away from the democracy promoting and poverty-fighting mindset towards trade, investment, and infrastructure development through the \$60bn US International Development Finance Corp that was launched in October 2018.

The pivot, the first since independence, signalled that the agency around solutions for democracy and poverty could be in the hands of Africans who could elect leaders of their choice. Moreover, although there was no healthy and mutually beneficial relationship in sight – since African leaders who would refuse to give preferential treatment to US corporations would likely suffer effects similar to Bolivia and Venezuela– there was at least the possibility to awaken Africans to the extent of their exploitation: to awaken Africans consciousness against exploitation.

Most importantly, Trump removed any pretence and pretext that American foreign policy is about defending American economic domination. In so doing, he disarmed democracy promoters and humanitarians. By removing other pretexts, he unwittingly empowered those who could see the opportunity to mobilise Africans against their own economic exploitation where democracy and humanitarianism, like a sedative, demobilised many and misled them into thinking that America wanted what's best for them.

Naturally, these democracy promoters were hostile to Africans – because they think they know better what Africans need, the after-effects of the post-1980s triumphalism interwoven with the DNA of exceptionalism – who wished Trump success in the hope that he could win a second term in order to further his foreign policy pivot. They charged that such Africans didn't wish well for Americans. However, to suggest that these Africans do not wish well for Americans implies that Americans who refuse to see the perniciousness of their foreign policy don't wish Africans well. The fact that Americans have developed mechanisms to shield their innocence is not an excuse. In fact, the tragedy is that not many Africans have the kind of clarity towards America that Americans have towards Africa, which explains why the status quo has been maintained. Since independence, the structural relationship between America and Africa has remained the same, with some cosmetic changes here and there, while retaining its substantive aspects of preserving their unpopular sons of bitches and mitigating the effects of unwanted dictators through the soft power of democracy promoting and poverty-fighting NGOs.

Trump might have been a son of a bitch for Americans, but he was "our" son of a bitch.