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Macron's African dilemma

For all his liberal rhetoric, Emmanuel Macron's Africa policy is still shaped by France's colonial past

Africans in France and across the continent greeted with relief and enthusiasm Emmanuel Macron's victory in the 2017 French election. The only time Africans celebrated the victory of another Western leader was when Barack Obama was first elected US president back in 2008. For many of them, especially in Francophone Africa, Macron is a symbol of hope. His victory might spell the end of France's disproportionate influence in its former colonies embodied by Françafrique.

However, these expectations are misplaced. Just like there was no major change to the US policy towards Africa under Obama, it is highly unlikely that French-African relations will take a fundamentally new turn under Macron's presidency, in spite of his promising election rhetoric. For African countries, his victory is an important reminder that as long as they let their partners take the driver's seat, they will continue to be on the receiving end of detrimental and unfair foreign policies.

A victory for Africa?

After a year marked by the UK's decision to leave the European Union and the election of Donald Trump in the US, millions of people watched the last French presidential election with great nervousness. While most nations around the globe celebrated France's win over populism, the French African diaspora and Africans across the continent breathed the loudest sigh of relief.

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Unlike his controversial far-right opponent Marine Le Pen, Macron was a symbol of hope and renewal. Many African leaders were quick to congratulate the newly elected president and called for even closer cooperation with France. The president of Ivory Coast, Alassane Ouattara, insisted on his "availability to work towards the strengthening of the friendship and cooperation between France and Côte d'Ivoire".

President Macky Sall of Senegal sent a similar message. And President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita from Mali believes Macron's election is "a beautiful victory which might be the start of a great new experience between France and its friends".

African populations, especially in Francophone Africa, shared these optimistic reactions to Macron's victory. As a young and progressive president, they believe that Macron will break away from his predecessors' neo-colonial approach towards Africa. They see him as a chance to finally end Françafrique, a system of informal political and commercial networks that has been accused of being the source of poverty and political instability in former French colonies. The system is based on connections between French and African elites who usually met while studying together at prestigious French universities. African leaders were given protection against criminal prosecution and public condemnation in exchange for political allegiance and lucrative deals for French companies.

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As a president with little experience in foreign relations, it is difficult to predict with precision how Macron will drive French foreign policy towards Africa. His election rhetoric sounded promising and suggested a desire to loosen France's grip [link in French] over its former colonies. However, due to a number of factors, it is unlikely French-African relations will take a fundamentally new turn under Macron's presidency.

Old policies get a pretty face

Macron might be a young, smart and progressive leader but he was elected to address economic, political and cultural interests at home that will prevent him from giving Africans what they desperately want. Sometimes, France's foreign policy decisions serve both the nation itself and African countries. Fighting Islamic terrorism in the Sahel region, for instance, is prominent on Macron's African agenda. Earlier this month, he attended the G5 Sahel Summit where he pledged support and financial assistance to the Sahel military force.

But saving Africans was not his primary concern. Rather, he considers that the increase of terrorist activity in that region poses a direct threat to France and to Europe. Not only does it threaten France's economic assets

in the region but it also has the potential to worsen Europe's migrant crisis. In addition, the terrorist threat has allowed France to strengthen its military presence in its former colonies, which does not bode well for the territorial sovereignty of those countries.

From an economic perspective, Françafrique has been a very lucrative business for France. Thanks to shady post-colonial agreements, France has cheap and easy access to the natural resources that it needs for these industries. Furthemore, some of France's largest companies hold a quasi-monopoly over strategic sectors of Francophone African economies, including electricity, telecommunications, infrastructure, airports and harbours. Bolloré, which is the region's largest logistics group by turnover, is active in more than 40 African countries. It operates 17 ports in Africa, including those of Abidjan in Côte d'Ivoire, Douala in Cameroon, Libreville Owendo in Gabon and Pointe-Noire in Congo. Since 92 percent of imports and exports to and from Africa are conducted by sea, controlling African ports equates to controlling African trade. Likewise, oil giant Total has a network of more than 4,000 service stations across Africa, while telecommunication company Orange has more than 120.7 million users in 20 countries. Last year, it had a turnover of € 5.24 billion, which represented 12.8 percent of the group's global activity. Thanks to shady post-colonial agreements, France has cheap and easy access to the natural resources that it needs for these industries.

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In an effort to counter the growing influence of India and China in Africa, former president François Hollande called on French business leaders to double their trade with the continent. There is little reason to believe Macron will change this policy.

A nation living in its past

Cultural sensitivities mean Macron could also face resistance from the French population if he tries to depart from France's traditional neo-colonial policy in Africa. Addressing the wounds of the past is the prerequisite to developing a new, more trusting relationship between France and its African partners. However, French national identity is intrinsically linked to the colonial past of the country – a source of pride and unity. The justification of colonialism as a *mission civilatrice* (civilising mission) is still the dominant rhetoric among French elites. Meanwhile, French Algeria lives on in the memories of the families of approximately one million conscripts who served in the war, as well as those of the pieds noirs who fled Algeria after its independence in 1962.

Any criticism of its colonial legacy is seen as an unpatriotic attack against the country's historic achievements, even if the French empire derived its power from the exploitation of people across the globe. This is why Macron's branding of France's colonial war in Algeria as a crime against humanity stirred such controversy, inciting protests and condemnation from right-wing politicians. He was even forced to apologise for having hurt voters' feelings. It is doubtful those same voters will make amends for the atrocities committed by their country when they see this past as a source of national pride and glory.

A wake-up call for Africans

In view of these different elements, it is clear Macron has no direct interest in unilaterally changing France's African policy in a way that will benefit African countries. However, due to his young age, business sense and humanist vision, he might be more open to new forms of cooperation. This is where the real opportunity lies for African countries and this is also where they missed the boat with Obama.

The same way France has an African policy, African countries should have strategies to deal with their main partners in order to protect their national interests. Otherwise, the other party at the negotiating table will always control the direction of the relationship based on his own vision of the world.

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In his latest blunder, Macron said that Africa's true challenge was "civilizational". This reveals that, in his opinion, African countries should follow the development model of Western societies, which are somehow superior and more "civilized". By adopting a passive attitude in their relations with foreign partners, African governments are actually encouraging this type of patronising and condescending statements from Western leaders.

Africa's challenges are complex, diverse and unique. Applying Western formulas to the African context has never worked. Therefore, it is up to African leaders and experts to define the type of development they want based on their own vision and priorities for the future. Only when they are able to come forward with concrete proposals and action plans, will they be able to redress the balance of relations with their foreign partners, including France.



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Jessica is a communications consultant who is passionate about Africa and the role the continent has to play on the international scene. She started her career in a pan-African strategy and communications consulting firm in London. There, she advised clients in the financial, mining, international development, education and agricultural sectors. Then, she moved to Gabon where she worked on government communications for WPP Team Gabon. She holds an LLM in European and International Law from the Catholic University of Leuven (Belgium) and an MSc. in Global Politics from the London School of Economics (UK).