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A battlefield for influence

The US administration has declared to be 'all in on Africa', but how is this perceived in the continent? Views from Ghana, Tanzania and Zamabia

Ghana

In the spring of 2023, the sky over Ghana's capital Accra was unusually crowded with planes from high-ranking foreign dignitaries. Not only did an Airbus from the German Air Force land here in February, but for several weeks in March, flights of transport aircraft from the US Air Force were seen as well. Black Hawk and Chinook helicopters circled near the airport, securing the area and providing logistics. Great effort was put into initiating important visits: there has been hardly any other moment in the history of Ghana's foreign relations when so many representatives of Western countries visited in such a short time. In February, first German Finance Minister Christian Lindner came to Ghana, and then Development Minister Svenja Schulze and Labour Minister Hubertus Heil on a joint mission. However, the diplomatic highlight of the year so far was the visit of US Vice President Kamala Harris in March. Against the backdrop of the recent *US-African Leaders Summit* in Washington, Harris unequivocally emphasised that the current US administration is 'all in on Africa' and announced a series of measures that will also benefit Accra. But what exactly is behind all this?

The countries have a long history of cooperation and human relations – for example, many of the slaves who were forced to work on plantations in the US and the Caribbean came from what is now Ghana, which, over time, had been ruled by various colonial powers. The diaspora's relationship with their ancestors' country of origin is strong and was further intensified when the Ghanaian government commemorated the beginning of slavery 400 years ago as part of the Year of Return initiative. Launched in 2019, the initiative aims to encourage the diaspora to visit Ghana and invest in the country. Nonetheless, it is fair to say that the American interest in Africa in general, and in Ghana in particular, should be viewed within a larger and more current context.

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America's recent charm offensive is primarily attributed to the central role that China has taken on and Russia's increasing activities in Africa – both of which seem to be forcing Western countries to adopt new cooperation approaches with Africa. In addition, issues related to security and the spread of terrorism in West Africa are also central to the US agenda, for which Harris announced $100 million in support during her recent visit. While this new American interest is welcomed in countries like Ghana, the decisive factor will be the extent to which a small country can pursue an independent policy within a new geopolitical constellation and see its economic and security policy interests respected. In any case, Ghana wants to avoid having to choose a side.

The country currently needs the support of both China and the United States, finding itself deep in an economic crisis. Inflation now stands at over 50 per cent, while the local currency, the cedi, has lost massively in value against the US dollar within the past year. In order to secure a rescue loan from the IMF, Accra has to agree on debt cuts with its external creditors. China plays a central role here since Ghana owes the country $1.7 bn. Although the Middle Kingdom is not refusing to enter into restructuring talks with Ghana, it is making the outcome of these talks contingent on whether multilateral donor organisations such as the World Bank are also willing to take *haircuts* themselves, that is, to suffer losses (which they have so far rejected).

This is where the US visit could help. Vice President Harris emphasised that the US will make efforts to persuade the Paris Club donor countries to ensure that Ghana is no longer left hanging and that the IMF loan can be granted. Whether this will happen could also be an indicator of the extent to which the new American interest in Africa is actually serious or just actionism.

Like many other countries in Africa, Ghana finds itself in a complex geopolitical situation. Navigating this correctly is difficult, but not impossible. For this, it is important that the country invests in its own strategic and diplomatic capacities and forms reliable alliances in Africa that are capable of supporting it in view of the strongly asymmetrical relations with the two poles, the US and China. Only then will there be no way around Accra for Western representatives.

Johann Ivanov, FES Accra

Tanzania

On 29 and 30 March 2023, US President Biden hosted the second (virtual) 'Summit for Democracy' together with the government of Zambia, among others. At the same time, on 30 March 2023, Vice President Kamala Harris met with Tanzanian President Samia Suluhu Hassan, currently the only female head of state in Africa, in Dar es Salaam. Relations between the two countries have been improving recently after the late President John Magufuli's governance caused extreme unease among Tanzania's international partners. Since taking office in March 2021, Hassan has been pursuing a course of reforms that has also revived and renewed international partnerships.

Coming shortly after the President lifted the ban on political rallies in January 2023 – in response to a demand from opposition parties – the visit was an important signal to side with the reformer. Harris described Hassan as a 'champion of democracy'. Even if critics say that Hassan has yet to earn this reputation (because reopening the political space did not require a change in the law), it must be acknowledged that she has done much in the past two years to promote a broader and more open political culture that could ultimately support democracy. The fact that no questions were allowed at the end of Hassan and Harris's press conference, which caused irritation in journalistic circles, shows that many steps regarding the democratic public sphere are still tentative. Harris's visit could become highly symbolic for Tanzania's planned re-entry into the global *Open Government Partnership*, an initiative that the country withdrew from in 2017. It is crucial to reinforce the reform course, especially since it is unclear whether hardliners in the governing party will accept more changes. The management of the municipal (2024) and presidential elections (2025) – and their compliance with democratic norms – will also prove essential. They could give the fragile progress a new democratic impetus.

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The US has pledged both instruments and $560 million in aid to Tanzania, part of which will support the democratic reform agenda. Still, as with the Democracy Summit, the question remains: how will progress made on commitments be tracked – and how is action taken if there is none?

The United States values Tanzania above all as a place of peace and

stability. In 1998, 11 people were killed in an al-Qaeda terrorist attack on the US Embassy in Dar es Salaam. Counter-terrorism and global security have been a priority ever since. However, the security policy cooperation agreement last signed in January 2023 for the coming years is just one pillar of bilateral relations and certainly not a unique selling point. For example, at the invitation of President Xi Jinping, Hassan paid a state visit to China in November 2022, where they agreed to further strengthen cooperation in the areas of peace and security and to work together to fight cross-border crime. And the fact that a partnership for 5G and network and information security has also started with the US – after the investments in 5G already agreed with China in 2022 to accelerate the digital economy and improve online security – should not be seen as either incoherent or redundant. In terms of international cooperation, Tanzania traditionally sees itself as free of any formal alliances with any of the major power blocs.

This is not tantamount to an anti-Western stance. It simply means that Tanzania's primary concern is with its actual interests and its own strategic guidelines. The Tanzanian government's foreign policy makes it clear that economic reforms and foreign investments, including those in mining and rare earths for the energy transition, are vital at the moment. For example, a key concern for the Tanzanian side has been the early extension of the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) trade agreement, which expires in 2023. The US seems to have recognised that its partner wants business, trade and investment relations above all: for this reason, Harris also offered to expand trade and announced further strategic investments in the battery nickel industry for the US and global markets.

Elisabeth Bollrich, FES Dar es Salaam

Zambia

Zambia's president had issued a stark warning ahead of the Summit for Democracy and against the backdrop of a pending agreement between the country and its foreign creditors. Hakainde Hichilema wrote in an opinion piece for Bloomberg: 'we cannot simply parrot lines about how democracy is good for citizens. It must be felt. Democracy is delicate. We cannot let debt damage it in the tumult.' The Zambian government has by no means been consistently playing a positive role in expanding democracy in the country. The political opposition had threatened to protest the second (digital) Summit for Democracy on 29–30 March and the visit of US Vice President Kamala Harris that immediately followed, highlighting the issue of the Zambian government's perceived over-tolerance towards the rights of LGBTQ people. The Home Affairs and

Internal Security Minister, Jack Mwiimbu, responded by announcing that the protests would not be allowed. He was obviously not concerned with the rights of minorities but with preventing damage to the government's image. And, of course, a blanket ban on demonstrations contradicts basic democratic values.

As a co-organiser of the digital Summit for Democracy, Zambia cooperated closely with the US during the preparation and professionally organised the event with American participation. The main event on 30 March, which was open to representatives of civil society organisations, was attended by US Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona and several senior Zambian government officials. However, they left the event immediately after the opening round, so that the ensuing content-related discussions took place largely among experts and NGO representatives.

Zambia is thus becoming a 'battleground' for influence between the two great powers, the US and China.

For the Zambian side, the summit was a welcome opportunity to highlight their own recent democratic accomplishments and to position themselves fundamentally as a democratic nation. The peaceful change of government in August 2021 significantly strengthened democracy in Zambia. An increasingly repressive regime was voted out of office, and the new government has done many things right so far, but at the same time, it has also not yet implemented central reform projects.

For the US side, evidently, the priority was to set the stage for a suitable mouthpiece on the African continent for their own narrative on values. There are hardly any tangible economic interests to be had in the sparsely populated Zambia for the US. But the same cannot be said about the People's Republic of China, so Zambia's commitment to democracy can be seen as a propaganda countermove. The Hichilema government has also agreed to the establishment of a military planning staff at the US embassy in Lusaka.

Zambia is thus becoming a 'battleground' for influence between the two great powers. Against the background of the precarious debt and the geopolitical situation, the country is debating its relationship with China on the one hand and the relationship with the Western camp on the other (no significant Russian influence is perceived at the moment, even if certain political actors still recall the supporting role of the Soviet Union in Zambia's anti-colonial struggle). The Chinese influence, especially in the economy and in the area of infrastructure, is undisputed

and largely viewed in positive terms. For example, in the run-up to Harris's visit, the joke was that the US Vice President would land at a Chinese-built airport terminal and drive on a Chinese-built road to a Chinese-built conference centre. In addition, concessions from the People's Republic are extremely important in addressing the country's debt crisis.

It is clear that Zambian society is largely drawn to an open model with respect for basic democratic rights, and it sees the past peaceful change of government as an important milestone in its development. However, the Zambian government then felt obliged to add a caveat to the official final declaration of the Summit for Democracy. It deals with the interpretation of the term 'inclusion' and related terms such as diversity, gender equality and gender identity. The government apparently felt compelled to clarify that the terms, as well as any steps taken to combat discrimination, will only be made in the context of the supposed Zambian culture and existing laws. And these laws recognise only the genders 'male' and 'female'. For some time to come, the development of democracy in Zambia will continue to evolve in the context of tension between East and West and between supposed tradition and civil liberties.

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