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The President's Last Trip to Africa: Focus on Promoting Economic Freedom and the Rule of Law

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On July 24, President Barack Obama will travel to Kenya before continuing on to Ethiopia. President Obama's final trip to Africa is intended to underscore the Administration's efforts "to work with the countries and citizens of sub-Saharan Africa to accelerate economic growth, strengthen democratic institutions, and improve security."¹

In fact, these ideas are not new. They have been an integral part of U.S. policy toward the continent for years. Yet symbolic gestures and remarks cannot substitute for much-needed meaningful action, which remains critical to mutual U.S. and African priorities. President Obama needs to engage Africa in concrete terms that are anchored in advancing economic freedom, security, and democratic rule of law in the continent.

Obama's Record on Africa: Mixed at Best

African leaders and citizens had great expectations in 2008 that the election of President Obama would elevate the continent's prominence and its concerns in U.S. government deliberations. Expectations swelled in Ghana, Senegal, Tanzania, and South Africa—the four sub-Saharan African countries that President Obama visited previously.

Kenyans and Ethiopians are excited to welcome President Obama for his historic visit, yet his trip comes at a time when many on the continent have had their high hopes for this Administration dashed. Regional instability and terrorism remain potent threats. Despite President Obama touting the success of his Administration's counterterrorism approach in Somalia,² al-Shabaab continues to threaten swathes of Somalia and, increasingly, Kenya. Northern Mali hosts a potpourri of terrorist organizations that menace the region, but receives little attention from the Administration.

Equally worrying is the Administration's reluctance to vigorously promote democratic values that buttress the rule of law on the continent. Leaders throughout Africa continue to indulge in undemocratic behavior, and many are maneuvering to extend their terms in office. The Administration has decried these developments and occasionally has taken measures to push back, but too often it has been indifferent to the cause of democracy promotion.³ In his 2009 speech in Ghana, the President noted that "Africa doesn't need strongmen, it needs strong institutions."⁴ Follow-up has been hard to find.

The President's African Visit

On this trip, the President will visit Kenya and Ethiopia.

Kenya. As the President's second "home," Kenya offers a unique opportunity. Although Obama visited as a private citizen and as a U.S. senator, his first official visit as President will have great significance not only to him, but also to Kenyans and other Africans.

Kenya has the largest economy in East Africa and is a leader in the integration of the East African

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Community. With Kenya struggling to emerge as Africa's innovation hub, the keynote event during Obama's visit will be attending the Global Entrepreneurship Summit.

However, the country also faces grave challenges. Kenya has been on the frontlines of the war against terrorism, especially against al-Shabaab. The government has thus far proven unable to protect the country from attacks by the group and has responded to the rising insecurity with legislation reminiscent of the laws that Ethiopia uses to suppress dissent.⁵

Ethiopia. The President's stop in Addis Ababa marks the first visit of a sitting U.S. President to Ethiopia and the African Union (AU) headquarters located there. With a large domestic market and promising economic prospects, Ethiopia has the potential to become a regional economic powerhouse.

However, state intervention in the relatively closed economy has suppressed economic dynamism and homegrown entrepreneurship that could nurture a more vibrant civil society. Substantial governance problems continue to hold back the second-most populous country in Africa.

The Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front party has been in power for 25 years. It secured all 547 parliamentary seats in May legislative elections to which Washington did not even bother sending election observers.⁶ According to the State Department's latest Human Rights Report, the Ethiopian government has imposed "restrictions on freedom of expression, including continued restrictions on print media and on the internet, and restrictions on freedom of association."⁷

Key Policy Issues for the President's Trip

For President Obama's final trip to Africa as President to have the greatest impact, he should focus on a few key policy issues with continental implications. To this end, he should:

- **Urge the leaders of Kenya to protect and enhance its democratic space.** Reportedly, he will be meeting with members of the opposition and civil society, which is welcome news.
- **Accentuate the critical linkages among a vibrant civil society, economic freedom, and dynamic innovation during the Global Entrepreneurship Summit.** Despite some setbacks caused by security turmoil and the Ebola outbreak over the past year, Africa's overall entrepreneurial environment has been evolving in a positive direction. In light of the continent's dynamic and shifting economic growth patterns, President Obama should seize the opportunity to reinforce a vision of economic freedom and empowerment.
- **Communicate unequivocally to the people of Ethiopia that his historic visit is not a validation of the current Ethiopian government.** The President should explicitly state in private and in public that a vibrant civil society, reinforced by the rule of law, is a critical ingredient for democratic principles to take root, and that repression has no place in addressing the challenges confronting Ethiopia.

1. Press release, "Statement by the Press Secretary on the President's Travel to Ethiopia," The White House, June 19, 2015, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/06/19/statement-press-secretary-president%E2%80%99s-travel-ethiopia> (accessed July 23, 2015).

2. Barack Obama, "Statement by the President on ISIL," The White House, September 10, 2014, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/09/10/statement-president-isil-1> (accessed July 23, 2015).

3. Jamie Dettmer, "Obama to Cut Middle East Democracy Programs," *The Daily Beast*, January 2, 2014, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2014/01/02/obama-administration-plans-decrease-in-funding-for-middle-east-democracy-promotion.html> (accessed July 23, 2015).

4. Barack Obama, "Remarks by the President to the Ghanaian Parliament," The White House, July 11, 2009, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-ghanaian-parliament> (accessed July 23, 2015).

5. Joshua Meservey, "False Security in Kenya," *Foreign Affairs*, January 21, 2015, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/east-africa/2015-01-21/false-security-kenya> (accessed July 23, 2015).

6. Jeffrey Smith and Mohammed Ademo, "Obama Should Stay Away from Ethiopia," *Foreign Policy*, July 8, 2015, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/07/08/obama-should-stay-away-from-ethiopia/> (accessed July 23, 2015).

7. U.S. Department of State, "Ethiopia 2014 Human Rights Report," 2014, <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/236570.pdf> (accessed July 23, 2015).

- **Discuss strategies for deepening regional trade and opening opportunities for investment during the visit to the AU.** Given the central role that the AU has played in African integration, including the recent launch of the ambitious Continental Free Trade Area negotiations, President Obama and AU leaders have many areas in which they can find opportunities to cooperate. One focus should be enhancing U.S.–Africa commercial engagements through the recently renewed African Growth and Opportunity Act.

A Test of Obama’s Leadership and Commitment to Africa

The President’s upcoming trip to Africa is an important moment in the U.S.’s relationship with the continent, and its people will be closely following his words. President Obama should firmly reiterate the importance of advancing economic freedom and

the democratic rule of law, and he should recommit to supporting those values with substantive policies. With only about 18 months left in office, the President’s final trip to Africa offers his best chance to push for such action. Missing this opportunity would be a setback for the U.S. and African nations’ interests, as well as a final disappointment in the President’s policy toward the continent.

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