

Report

The Sociopolitical Impact of Brexit on Africa

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Brexit: Is it necessary for saving democracy in Europe & stopping war? [EP]

Abstract

The British Referendum (Brexit) of 23 June 2016 on whether to remain or leave the European Union (EU) is going to have a great impact on the elite and the white populations of Africa. The new sociopolitical attitudes towards the non-British have started to impact on the attractiveness of Britain as a tourist and investment destination. Furthermore the continent has over the years strengthened its relationship with China and Russia. These two countries are most likely to be preferred by Africa moving forward.

Introduction

The debate in Africa about the results of the British referendum held on 23 June 2016 has mainly concentrated on the economic impact of Brexit. What about the possible adverse sociopolitical impact Brexit will have on Africa, and vice versa? Brexit is going to have a strong impact on the African elite and African white society. Africa's reaction is likely to match that of Europe and those of its close allies such as China and Russia. Africa will also take advantage of the new sociopolitical reality and try to push for certain reforms, especially regarding visa requirements. Importantly, should the 'isolation' of Britain backlash, it is unlikely that Africa will be lenient or sympathetic.

Firstly, it is important to remember that the history of Britain in Africa is characterised by oppression and economic exploitation. Within this troubled history, there has never been any kind of reconciliation. The British never apologized and consequently Africans are very skeptical of Britain. According to Thokozani Mkhwanazi, a prominent academic from South Africa, the British have conveniently chosen to ignore the violations committed by their country and somehow expect Africans to carry on as if nothing ever happened.⁽¹⁾ President Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe has repeatedly called on Britain to

apologise for the atrocities committed in Africa during the colonial period. These demands are received with scorn by the British, but they resonate with most Africans – particularly the younger generation. There is a new generation of Africans who believes that Britain needs to be held accountable for its past actions and must repatriate all the stolen wealth to Africa. Recently the South African students at the University of Cape Town established a #RhodesMustFall Twitter campaign. This campaign was dedicated to removing the statue of Cecil John Rhodes, the former Prime Minister of the Cape Colony, from the university campus. The chief focus of this movement was to “create avenues for real transformation that students and staff alike have been calling for.”(2) Their argument is that Rhodes was a racist and his statue in the campus does not help to eradicate racial tensions which still haunt South African universities. Furthermore many Africans still feel angered by the treatment they continue to receive from Britain and some European countries, particularly at the ports of entry. Despite a shared language and culture, most African countries have drifted away from economic and political partnership with Britain. They have instead opted to associate with the countries that supported their struggle against imperialism, such as China and Russia.

Brexit will mainly impact on the black elite and white Africans

“Britain must return all the stolen wealth invested in that country by the corrupt African officials.” This was President Buhari of Nigeria’s response to former UK Prime Minister David Cameron’s remarks’ in which he described Nigeria and Afghanistan as “fantastically corrupt countries.” Buhari’s retort reflects a widely held view of Britain by most Africans. The corrupt African elite continue to benefit from the safe havens provided by Britain. They use the country’s financial institutions to hide suspicious funds. These investments by the corrupt African officials benefit the British economy and so Britain has preferred to turn a blind eye to these unscrupulous people. Their families live in luxury in some of the most expensive boroughs of London at the expense of the poor Africans. The British health sector also benefits tremendously from these people, as they mostly prefer British medical treatment to that of their home countries. In addition, the UK is a popular holiday destination. Holidaymakers from various countries in Africa spend very large sums of money annually with their families.

Since Brexit, Britain has been characterised by animosity towards foreigners: there has been an upsurge of xenophobic and racially motivated attacks. This suggests that concerns about levels of migration to the UK over the past 10 years, its impact on society, and what might happen in the next 20 years, were more widely felt and ran even deeper than people had suspected.(3) Brexit results and the events that followed exposed the ugly side of Britain – something the 48% remain voters would have preferred to keep hidden. Africans travelling alone in certain parts of the country now risk being attacked on the streets of British cities. This is the new reality for Africans and other nationalities wishing to live in Britain. Offensive posters and graffiti insulting

minorities are on the increase. Recently a family in one of the neighborhoods of London identified a racist poster which read "No Blacks, No Irish, No Dogs."⁽⁴⁾ The upsurge of xenophobic and racist incidences is likely to affect the presence and comfort of the African elite in Britain.

Furthermore the depreciation of the British pound in the aftermath of the referendum has resulted in the loss of millions of pounds overnight. The pound sterling is most likely to continue to plummet when the actual process of leaving the European Union (EU) commences next year. Britain's economy was already slowing ahead of the referendum and Carney, Governor of the Bank of England, had warned that the British economy could fall into recession in the event of a vote to leave the EU⁽⁵⁾. This will affect British holidaymakers and the short-term investors who have been for a long time taking advantage of the weak African economies. It will also affect the African elite who have invested in the British economy. The African elite wishing to enroll their children to study abroad, and indeed those wishing to migrate to Britain will also encounter added difficulties. It is therefore not far-fetched to assume that the new political and social reality could prompt a redirection of African spending away from Britain. Britain will cease to be a destination of choice for the African elite and for their investments. Hopefully this will encourage pan-African tourism, particularly to countries like South Africa which have numerous tourist attractions.

Brexit will have a serious political impact on the millions of English speaking white Africans, particularly in South Africa. There is a false belief within the white African communities that they are 'sojourning' in Africa and home awaits somewhere in Europe. This attitude towards Africa and Europe alike exists within both those who hold dual nationalities and single African nationality. The result of the referendum and the reasons for leaving the EU have undoubtedly been sobering for those Africans who still regard Britain as 'home'. White Africans regarded themselves as Europeans and their actions, culture and public statements indicate that they did not regard themselves as Africans, nor did they willingly and publicly associate themselves with anything African.⁽⁶⁾ The Brexit results will likely alter their future political outlook towards Africa; it will renew and encourage their social and political engagement.

Africa is most likely to take its cue from Europe, China and Russia

Britain has a number of treaties locked inside its membership to the EU. Britain's separation from the EU is most likely to trigger the review of privileges between Britain and Africa on certain issues, particularly those concluded under the umbrella of the EU. It is likely that the block benefits associated with the membership of EU will cease to apply to Britain once it is disentangled from the EU. Africa might follow the direction of Europe, China and Russia when it comes to dealing with Britain. Britain has benefited under the EU: it would have been difficult to achieve this level of political and economic

prosperity in isolation given the past exploitative relationship with the continent. Britain's exit from the EU might necessitate a renegotiation of the bilateral arrangements agreed under the umbrella of the EU. The African skepticism of Britain will make the new negotiations very difficult. Take for example the 2007 Joint Africa-EU Strategy decided by 80 African and European heads of state. The Strategy encompasses the Africa-EU Partnership, the overarching political framework defining bilateral relations. Its goal is a partnership between equals that will jointly tackle issues of mutual concern.(7)

The political relationships that exist between the African Union (AU) member states, China and Russia will also determine the future relationship between Africa and Britain. Both China and Russia were key supporters of the decolonization of Africa and this historical relationship will be important in any future political partnership with Britain, as will the renegotiated relationship between Africa and the EU countries. It is also anticipated that there will be some political wrangling between Africa and Europe regarding a future relationship with Britain. Given the size of the combined economic power of Europe it is most unlikely that Africans will prioritize Europe over Britain if faced with a choice.

Moreover, as mentioned earlier, Britain has the toughest regulations for African nationals at their ports of entry. Recently African countries were added to the list of countries requiring a visa when transiting through London. Africans wishing to connect from London must have a UK visa even if they do not intend to leave the airport. Anyone who does not hold a valid visa or residency permit for the USA, Canada, Australia or New Zealand will need a transit visa to travel via the UK.(8) Africans have been threatening to reciprocate these visa restrictions. The South African government and the Department of Home Affairs began implementing the visa requirements for British diplomatic passport holders as of September 2014.(9) Ordinary passport holders are still exempt from acquiring a visa to enter South Africa for now. The growing appeal of Africa as an attractive destination has seen a rise in tourism and business. This has provided leverage for Africa to demand equal treatment, particularly when it comes to travel.

Conclusion

Many sociopolitical analysts often treat Africa as a single entity. Africa is not a country, it is a continent consisting of 56 (54 countries and 2 disputed) countries. However, due to the strong influence the AU wields on the foreign policy of the continent, it does sometimes behave like a single entity. Africa has tended to embrace a block position on many political matters with regards to the West. It is therefore assumed that Africa will follow the same path in dealing with Britain post Brexit. Political and economic prospects in Africa are competed by China, Russia and India. The economic rise and political stability in Africa have emasculated the continent.

African countries are demanding equality in the global multilateral platforms. South Africa has been leading a campaign to demand the inclusion and the provision of a permanent seat at the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). Africa has also been very determined and resolute in negotiations at the World Trade Organisation (WTO). The firming of African political attitude stems from years of exploitation at the hands of European colonizers, particularly Britain and France. Although direct rule ended in the early 1960s, French influence over its former possessions continued.⁽¹⁰⁾ The young African generation who grew up listening to the tales of exploitation are exasperated, hence the demands now for reparations and the redressing of economic and political relations with Britain, France and other former colonisers. They are also demanding the rescindment of past colonial agreements that still perpetuate political and economic exploitation in some African countries to this day.

The Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), a new political party led by mostly young South Africans, has been campaigning for the nationalization of certain private entities in South Africa. They have also been very vocal on the expropriation of land without compensation. White South Africans own most land in South Africa.

Britain without Europe will be weakened and future political engagements with Africa will be very difficult. It remains to be seen to what extent the close allies of Africa, especially China and Russia, will influence African attitudes towards Britain.

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