

Testimony of Dr. Mo Ibrahim
Senate Foreign Relations Committee
April 18, 2012

As the Honourable Committee seeks to review United States policy options with regard to African Heads of state whose behaviour challenges United States values and objectives, the wording might benefit from some amendments

The manipulation or disregard of constitutions by African heads of states is, primarily a violation of African values and objectives. Democracy and good governance are not American values, they are universal. All nations that subscribe to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international legal instruments must uphold those values. Therefore the approach of the United States in seeking to reinforce those norms must begin from this premise.

Since the transformation of the OAU in to the AU in 2001, there has been a paradigm shift that has allowed states to intervene in the affairs of other sovereign states. Furthermore, in recent times we have seen African Regional Economic Communities, ECOWAS in particular, take a very strong and unified position on Heads of State who behave unconstitutionally. The immediate expulsion of Niger from ECOWAS when President Tandja tried to extend his mandate (and more recent actions regarding Cote d'Ivoire and Mali) show the political cohesion and force that these communities can –probably in a more efficient and sustainable way than any foreign partner - bring to bear on errant member states. Thus, by supporting and endorsing regional economic communities to take the lead on such issues, the United States can bolster the capacity of these hugely under-resourced African institutions to solve crises while avoiding accusations of interfering in the affairs of sovereign nations. And this is probably the most efficient way to get results

Contrast this approach with that adopted by Prime Minister Blair in Durban in 2002. By singling President Mugabe out for sustained criticism, Tony Blair inadvertently caused other Heads of State from the SADC region- who were at that time showing signs of frustration with regime - to close ranks against “colonialist arrogance”. Consequently, it has been impossible for SADC to take a progressive position on the political situation in Zimbabwe.

More broadly, one must shift from a focus on individuals and naming and shaming to a focus on institutions and building incentives. While those institutions must be African, the incentives used can be more universal.

One of the core reasons behind instituting the Ibrahim Prize for Achievement in African Leadership was the interest to to set examples for the continent and to prove that excellence in African leadership was indeed possible. But an equally important rationale was that of creating a life after office. While any retired Heads of State elsewhere- whether or not he/she has demonstrated excellence in leadership- can serve on corporate Boards and leverage their previous experience into high-profile and highly lucrative work, such opportunities rarely exist in Africa. Therefore, there is an incentive for leaders to remain for as long as possible and to ensure their financial security while in office.

While the Prize seeks to redress this, much more could be done in this regard. Retired Heads of State have vast experience and networks that could be brought to bear on some of the challenges facing the

continent. One traditional route is leading African Union or Commonwealth election observer missions. It is worth noting the extremely important, and unrecognised, role that Former Nigerian President Olesegun Obasanjo played as AU Head of Observer Mission during the recent elections in Senegal.

Moreover, as we see the 'African Renaissance' generation of Heads of State drawing to a close and the rise of a much younger and more technocratic leadership generation whose agendas are more national than international, it may be appropriate to create mechanisms for former Heads of State to represent Africa in a unified way in global climate and trade negotiations. Such challenging, high-profile and prestigious roles would offer exactly the kind of life after office that could contribute to a higher turnover of leaders.

The United States has successfully identified how incentives can promote the good governance agenda through the Millennium Challenge Corporation. Initiatives that seek to praise rather than blame and isolate are invariably more constructive. More could be done in this direction through endorsing initiatives such as the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative and the Natural Resource Charter, as well as facilitating resolution of land tenure issues. Such initiatives that clearly delineate public assets and create a sense of public ownership will invariably help to mitigate the trend whereby Heads of State conflate national and personal assets. Conversely, approaches that focus too much on the individual and seek to hold them up to great acclaim or condemnation, perpetuates personalised rule.

The US approach to democracy and good governance, in comparison with other countries, has the unique advantage of being consistent with the identity and brand of the US. However, this is undermined when US processes are not seen to conform to principles of good governance around contentious issues such as the US 'ownership' of the World Bank Presidency and even the debate that surrounded the United States Presidential election in Florida in 2000. In this regard, the most effective intervention would be to ensure that the government was able to practise what it preaches. If not, the subsequent loss of legitimacy will render good governance goals unattainable.

Finally, in assessing the impact of the Ibrahim Prize on governance in Africa, I believe that the most important outcome is the debate that has been created, the speculation over whether incumbents will or could win or over whether predecessors should have won. It is exposing the record of Heads of State to scrutiny and creating awareness that, upon retiring, they will be assessed by their peers very publicly. In her most recent book, President Johnson Sirleaf discusses her ambition to win the Prize. One other, now retired, Head of State mentioned the Prize in his rationale for not seeking another term. For an initiative only five years old to begin to change behaviours is a source of real affirmation for the work of our organisation. Moreover, if we have had some success, it is because the Prize was designed as a response to a lack of incentives in this space and an understanding that individuals of all nationalities are motivated by the same things. Last but not least, while we focussed on individuals, it was from the perspective of seeking to praise rather than blame.

In summary, the greater the emphasis on supporting African institutional positions on these issues and working to align the incentives of Heads of State with regular democratic transitions, the greater the likelihood of success.