

US counter-terrorism policies in Africa are counter to development

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Terrorism is *the* central threat to the world today. At least that's the way the US government sees it. According to the Bush administration, the danger emanates less from superpower states and more from weak, 'failing' states. The logic is that autocratic governments foster, breed, and provide safe havens for terrorists – extremists who, given the chance, will harness weapons of mass destruction and attack the US. In order to quell the rise of terrorism, the US has developed a global strategy that includes promoting democracy, building alliances, encouraging 'global economic growth', and acting militarily.¹ Several US policies that follow from this strategy focus on Africa. It is a multi-faceted approach that includes expanding military occupation, training African police and militaries, building schools in Muslim areas, and pressing African legislatures to enact anti-terror laws.²

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Using numerous tools to stop terrorism might work in the short term because the policies address three of the four ‘major fronts’ of the problem: the capabilities of the terrorists, the intentions of the terrorists, and the defences against the terrorists.³ However, the fourth front – the roots of terrorism, or autocracy – appears to be receiving short shrift. In fact, the current US terrorism policies in Africa appear to be counter-productive, facilitating and/or maintaining autocratic styles of governance. Even more detrimental is the further stifling of development in Africa. Civil and political rights are being compromised. African liberty is being constricted, and democracy is being squashed.

But is US foreign policy truly to blame? It could be argued that poor economic growth is what hinders democratisation and development in African states. Lipset asserts that “the more well-to-do a nation, the greater the chances that it will sustain a democracy”.⁴ However, a statistical analyses comparing democratisation and economic variables shows that in the period 2000–2006, neither economic prosperity, nor the presence or absence of a strong middle class, is a clear indicator of democratisation for African states.⁵ So, maybe the US counter-terrorism strategy is at fault and American actions are hindering development by waging an overzealous ‘war on terror.’

This may be nothing new, though. The US has had an up and down relationship with the continent of Africa since post-World War II. During the Cold War, African states became the ideological battleground for communism and democracy. But ironically American foreign policy “often ignored principles as basic as democracy and development and focused parochially on containing the ‘red peril’ in Africa through providing military and financial assistance to often brutal and undemocratic clients like Liberia’s Samuel Doe, Zaire’s Mobutu Sese Seko, and Somalia’s Siad Barre, in exchange for political support and military bases”.⁶ When the Cold War ended, much of this support was withdrawn and it was not until the Clinton administration that the US re-engaged with Africa. The US began constructing democratising policies, but these were a failure as well, and only the effort to liberalise trade appeared somewhat helpful on the continent. Another lull occurred after Clinton’s presidency, and Africa remained on the periphery of American foreign policy until after the terrorist attacks on 11 September.

As of 2006, US foreign policy for Africa has expanded significantly to include the ‘war on terror.’ American military troops have descended upon numerous African states in the northern, eastern and western regions of the continent. Some of the early missions included an effort to train military personnel and police forces in border control in Mali, Niger, Chad and Mauritania. This US State Department policy, known as the Pan-Sahel Initiative, started in 2003 with a support fund of US\$7.75 million.⁷ Significant counter-terrorism efforts are also occurring in Kenya, Djibouti, Nigeria, Tanzania, Ethiopia, Morocco, and Algeria, with countries receiving financial assistance, immigration control software and hardware to better track citizens, and general law enforcement training.⁸ Countries such as Kenya, Malawi, South Africa, Tanzania and Uganda are also being pushed by the US to institute anti-terror

legislation.⁹ Overall, the essential aspects of US foreign policy can be characterised as the re-militarising of African states, the initiating of repressive legislation, and the presence of military troops and execution of military exercises on the African continent.

For the most part, African governments have cooperated in this 'war on terror'. At some time or another from 2003 to 2006 every country on the continent has participated in the effort, either in discussions with US government officials, with passage of anti-terror laws, and/or through large-scale anti-terrorism operations within their country (such as Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger).¹⁰ Even long-time adversary Libya has cooperated, supplying intelligence on militant Islamic groups, even though it has been on the US State Department's list of countries that sponsor terrorism.

Despite this apparent African 'cooperation', problems abound, and the Bush administration continues to be criticised for having a split focus – cultivating relationships with dictators and at the same time urging democratic reform.¹¹ For example, despite the US anti-terror presence in Algeria, this North African state has continued to ignore democracy and maintain its 'robust authoritarianism'.¹² In Ethiopia, "[f]or more than a decade, authorities in the country's vast Oromia region have used exaggerated concerns about armed insurgency and 'terrorism' to justify the torture, imprisonment and sustained harassment of their critics and even ordinary citizens".¹³ Even though this abuse has been well documented, the US still nurtures its tight partnership with Ethiopia for the 'war on terror', and the US government remains the largest donor of bilateral aid to the African country. The US has yet to press Ethiopia on human rights violations, and in both Ethiopia and Eritrea, helping the US combat terror has sometimes become a rationale for African leaders to commit their own human rights abuses.¹⁴

Furthermore, before 11 September, Egypt was utilising "anti-terrorism decrees and emergency rule to suppress peaceful dissidents".¹⁵ It was the status quo for this North African state, and after the terrorists attack in the US, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak appeared even more justified for having aggressive tactics, including the indiscriminate torture of citizens. He stated, "There is no doubt that the events of September 11 created a new concept of democracy that differs from the concept that Western states defended before these events, especially in regard to the freedom of the individual."¹⁶ US officials were not alarmed by Mubarak's stance, and in fact the Egyptian president was even lauded for his state's anti-terrorist efforts. Secretary of State Colin Powell said that Mubarak's government was "really ahead of us on this issue".¹⁷ Yes, maybe ahead on terrorism, but clearly behind on democratisation.

Egypt also weakens its civil-military relationship by trying civilians in military tribunals – a practice that has occurred in Liberia, Tunisia and Uganda as well. In 2002, an editor and several reporters from a Liberian newspaper were arrested and held 'incommunicado'. Hassan Bility, Ansumana Kamara, Abubakar Kamara, and Blama Kamara were all

accused of being part of a terrorist cell. Both the Liberian government and the courts decided that reporter Bility should be tried in a military court.¹⁸ In Tunisia, some civilians have been tried in military courts, thereby losing their right to appeal:

The government uses the threat of terrorism and religious extremism as a pretext to crack down on peaceful dissent. Government critics are frequently harassed or imprisoned on trumped-up charges after unfair trials. Over four hundred political prisoners remained incarcerated, nearly all of them suspected Islamicists.¹⁹

Also of concern is the US strategy to install more anti-terror legislation in African states. Much of this push to legislate appears to emanate from the US enacting of the US Patriot Act. States such as Kenya, Morocco, Nigeria, South Africa, Swaziland, Tanzania, Tunisia and Uganda are either working on or have passed anti-terror related laws that have been used to squash freedom of the press, as well as dissent. Swaziland's 'Secrecy Act' compels reporters to reveal their sources if related to terrorism investigations.²⁰ South Africa's Protection of Constitutional Democracy against Terrorism and Related Activities Act also requires reporters to reveal sources.²¹ After enacting a new terror law in 2003, Moroccan officials used the power of the act against the press. Managing editor of the newspaper *Al Ousbane* was arrested in June 2003 for printing a letter from a group claiming responsibility for three of five bombings that had recently taken place in Casablanca.²² Other journalists were arrested in the same year, but were eventually prosecuted under other laws. In Eritrea journalists are subject to legal persecution as well. An Eritrean ambassador defended his government's arrests of journalists, saying that holding them but not charging them is the same practice that Western countries use for terrorists.²³ Such direct assaults on the press continue to erode citizens' ability to participate in the democratic process. Freedom of the press in the US is a highly protected democratic right, one that is being seriously impinged upon in African countries with the assistance of new anti-terror laws.

A final case worth noting is Somalia. US involvement there has nurtured chaos and has reinforced divisiveness. Of concern is not only the backing of warlords, but also of the lack of engagement with the transitional government. This is peculiar given that, in 2003, the US State Department commended the "ongoing work of Somali leaders and civil society representatives" for working towards peace and creating a transitional government.²⁴ Paradoxically, what was most worrisome for the US ended up happening as the Islamic militia overran the warlords and gained control of Mogadishu. Fortunately, though, the CIA-led strategy was seen as a disaster by some American government officials.²⁵

Overall, it suffices to say that US counter-terrorism policies are counter to development. It is as if more manure were being applied to the fields of autocracy. Democratisation and development involve the building of a civil society. But this dimension of politics is being squashed by America's global counter-terrorism effort. Admittedly, trying to extinguish terrorism is a difficult challenge. Nevertheless, many African states are already struggling to

democratise, and the 'war on terror' is becoming yet another strain on reform. US policy-makers who work on the issue of terrorism should seriously reconsider the current aggressive approach in Africa as it is obviously self-defeating. Instead, multiple, more fruitful options that focus on democratisation and the empowering of African citizens should be pursued.

Notes

- 1 See G Bush, The national security strategy of the United States of America, US government document, September 2002, p 10, <www.whitehouse.gov/nsc/nss.html> (27 March 2006).
- 2 J Keenan, Terror in the Sahara: The implications of US imperialism for North and West Africa, *Review of African Political Economy*, 101, 2004, pp 475-496 and To fight Al Qaeda, US troops in Africa build schools instead, *Christian Science Monitor*, 9 January 2006; P Lyman & S. Morrison, The terrorist threat in Africa, *Foreign Affairs*, 83(1), 2004, pp 75-86; B Kraxberger, The United States and Africa: Shifting geopolitics in an 'age of terror', *Africa Today*, 52(1), 2005, pp 47-68.
- 3 See P Pilar, *Terrorism and US foreign policy*, Brookings Institution, Washington, DC, 2001, p 29.
- 4 S Lipset, *Political man*, Mercury Books, London, 1963, p 50.
- 5 ANOVA tests using polity scores, Freedom House scores and gross domestic product per capita and GINI coefficients were run for all African states.
- 6 See page 176 in A Adebajo, Africa and America in an age of terror, *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, 38(2-3), 2003, pp 175-191.
- 7 S Ellis, Briefing: The Pan-Sahel Initiative, *African Affairs*, 103(412), 2004, pp 459-464.
- 8 Fighting terrorism in Africa, Hearing before the Subcommittee on Africa of the Committee on International Relations House of Representatives, 108th Congress, Second Session, 1 April 2004, Serial No 108-82.
- 9 Kraxberger, op cit, p 60.
- 10 See, for example, 'Sudan' section in Human Rights Watch, Opportunism in the face of tragedy: Repression in the name of anti-terrorism, 2006, <www.hrw.org/campaigns/september11/opportunismwatch.htm> (13 March 2006); International Federation of Journalists, Journalism, civil liberties and the war on terrorism, 2006, <www.ifj.org/default.asp?Index=3101&Language=EN> (25 March 2006); International Crisis Group, Islamist terrorism in the Sahel: Fact or fiction? *Africa Report*, 92-31 March 2005, <www.crisisgroup.org/home/index.cfm?l=1&id=3349> (3 April 2006).
- 11 T Carothers, Promoting democracy and fighting terror, *Foreign Affairs*, 82(1), 2003, pp 84-97.
- 12 J Entelis, The democratic imperative vs the authoritarian impulse: The Maghrib state between transition and terrorism, *Middle East Journal*, 59(4), 2005, pp 537-558.
- 13 See p 104 of Human Rights Watch, World report 2006, <hrw.org/wr2k6/africa/index.htm> (3 April 2006); Human Rights Watch, Ethiopia and Eritrea: Promoting stability, democracy and human rights, Testimony to the House of Representatives, 5 May 2005, <www.hrw.org/english/docs/2005/05/05/ethiop10659.htm> (5 May 2006).
- 14 Human Rights Watch, World report 2006, op cit.
- 15 See p 11, Human Rights Watch, In the name of counter-terrorism: Human rights abuse worldwide, A Human Rights Watch briefing paper for the 59th Session of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights, 25 March 2003, <www.hrw.org/un/chr59/counter-terrorism-bck.pdf> (13 March 2006).
- 16 Human Rights Watch, Opportunism in the face of tragedy, op cit.
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 Ibid.
- 19 Human Rights Watch, World report 2006, op cit, p 489.
- 20 International PEN, Anti-terrorism, writers and freedom of expression, 2003, <www.internationalpen.org.uk/images/newsItemDownload/Antiterr.pdf> (25 March 2006).
- 21 International Federation of Journalists, op cit.
- 22 International PEN, op cit, p 22.
- 23 Human Rights Watch, Opportunism in the face of tragedy, op cit.
- 24 US Department of State, Somalia peace process, US Department of State press statement, 22 September 2003, <www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2003/24290.htm> (2 May 2006).
25. Efforts by CIA fail in Somalia, officials charge, *New York Times*, 8 June 2006, Section A, p 1.