Interview – Olukayode Bakare

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Dr. Olukayode Bakare specializes in international relations and sub-Saharan African politics. He earned his Ph.D. in international relations from the University of Aberdeen, UK, and has held teaching and research positions at various universities in Nigeria and the United Kingdom. Dr. Bakare has played pivotal roles in scholarly forums within his field and has presented at numerous international conferences. He's currently a researcher in International Relations at the School of International Global and International Studies, State University of New York, OSWEGO, New York, USA. He is also a Visiting Fellow in Security and Statecraft at the London School of Economics and Political Science's Department of International Relations, United Kingdom. He has also served as a Teaching Assistant and Visiting Fellow in the field of international affairs, Durham University's School of Government and International Affairs in Durham, United Kingdom.

Dr. Bakare's academic interests focus on foreign policy, democratization, security, development, international organizations, sub-Saharan African politics, and geopolitical issues. He is dedicated to educating others about the complexities and nuances of the African region, striving to enhance understanding of contemporary African challenges.

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

I can see the most exciting research and debates in my field on the current geopolitical shift and political landscape in sub-Saharan Africa. Issues such as security, economy, hybrid regimes, coups, and immigration, have been the central focus of interest that have attracted scholarly debates and research with regards to the ongoing scramble for regional dominance and clash of ideologies between the Western and Eastern blocs in the region. This has prompted researchers and scholars to revisit the Cold War era (1945-1990). For example, the resurgence of military coups in West Africa in recent times underscored a shift in global order and a clash of ideologies between France, the U.S.A. and Russia. While Moscow's intervention and involvement in Africa since its defeat in the Cold War lags behind other world powers, it is increasingly tapping into anti-Western sentiment or ideologies to bolster its influence on the continent. These debates on the changing Global Order research, particularly in Africa, reveals that the growing geopolitical contest between the Kremlin and the White House in Africa, France's Niger debacle that led to the withdrawal of 1,500 troops from Niger, and the persistent military coups in Burkina Faso, Chad, Gabon, Guinea, and Mali, leaves a gaping hole in Western efforts to fully democratise Africa and counter a decade-long Islamist insurgency and could increase Moscow's influence and entrenchment of authoritarianism across the vast, ungovernable borders of West Africa, which thus poses threats to international security order and democracy in the region and thus underscores a new Cold War era in the region. The challenge confronted by the U.S. and France in maintaining and sustaining their strategic interests in sub-Saharan Africa underscores an interesting moment and a new discourse on geopolitical rivalries in the region suffering from democratic backsliding and insecurity. Interestingly, the erosion of both American and French strategic influence in the region calls for a recalibration and rejigging of their foreign policy approaches in the face of shifting alliances in the Sahel with the Kremlin.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

The world has certainly changed over time due to the geopolitical tensions and uncertainties that have accompanied

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the Cold War era (1945-1990). I would say that within the mainstream conceptualisation of global order, hierarchical structures, and anarchical system in world politics today, the most compelling understanding of my view about the way the world has changed over time. This change cannot be isolated from the view that the entire world is currently undergoing instability since the creation of the United Nations in 1945. In the face of a global expansion of deadly conflicts, the United Nations has failed to maintain global peace and order. Following the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, and rising incidences of deadly conflict in the Middle East (Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Afghanistan, the Caucasus, the Horn of Africa and Sudan), Ukraine, Sub-Saharan Africa (Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Somalia), and Asia (Ecuador, Colombia, India, Indonesia and Thailand), I conclude that the world is sitting on a powderkeg, edging towards perpetual instability and anarchy, while the UN continues to remain weakened due to the actions of veto-wielding permanent members, such as the US, France, China, UK, and Russia.

How do you envision the African Union's role in the emerging multipolar geopolitical order?

The role of the African Union (AU) in the emerging multipolar geopolitical landscape cannot be separated from the bipolar (1945-1990), unipolar, and multipolar geopolitical order. The end of the Cold War between the US and USSR ended the bipolar, geopolitical rivalries, and tensions from 1945-1990. Meanwhile, the continent of Africa was not spared from the naïve optimism and uncertainties that accompanied this era. In response to the ideological rivalries between the two blocs, in 1955, the representatives and leaders of African and Asian countries assembled in Bandung, Indonesia, to discuss the role of the Third World nations in economic development and decolonization during the Cold War. The Bandung conference was a historic step for the attainment of decolonization and economic transformation of both the African and Asian continents – it gave birth to the principle of the Non-aligned Movement (NAM), and led to the formation of the Organisation of the Africa Unity (OAU) in May 1963. Although the OAU was instrumental for the decolonization and economic prosperity of African countries, the question of how to construct a virile African foreign policy without favouring either of the two blocs and sowing disunity among the African states posed serious challenges to the OAU during the bipolarity era. The demise of the bipolar world witnessed the African continent tilting towards the West for political and economic aid. From 1991-2014, the African continent was embroiled in the 'fever' of the US unipolarity syndrome, with continued dependence on the West for economic growth and development. Meanwhile, following the economic and political realities and uncertainties that accompanied the Cold War, and the inability of the OAU to offer practical solutions to the underlying contradictions militating against the African continent, the AU was formed in 2001 by two leading African presidents, Thabo Mbeki of South Africa and Olusegun Obasanjo of Nigeria. The realisation of the need to push the African continent out of political instability and underdevelopment, for greater representation and to speak with one voice at the global level, reinforced the formation of the AU as an instrument of African solutions to African problems.

Meanwhile, the creation of the AU and the emergence of the multipolar system order, owing to globalization and interdependence, has reshaped the global order and repositioned the African continent as a strong force to reckon with the economic and political influence of China, which has been more domineering and challenging to traditional powers like the UK, France and U.S.A. Today, we could see the resurgence and rising influence of Russia as an alternative world power for countering terrorism and insecurity in the Sahel. As noted by the Council of Foreign Affairs, the rising influence of Russia and covert support of authoritarianism, such as the backing of military coups in Africa, is undermining and eroding Africa's democratic values and institutions. Similarly, the recent alignment of the "coup belt" countries with Russian private military Wagna Group, is reinforcing conflict, worsening human rights abuses, and complete militarization of governance in the Sahel. As Russia continues to whittle down the Western influence in the region, however, the United States and other Western countries must as a matter of urgency prioritise development initiatives, for promoting democracy and stability in Africa. Otherwise, the strategic interests of these great powers in the Gulf of Guinea might be overtaken by both Beijing and the Kremlin.

In addition, it could also be argued that the recent development in Africa and around the world has changed the African position in global politics. For example, the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation and the Africa-EU Partnership were both established in 2000, and the Russia-Africa Summit in 2019, all of which gave the AU the platforms to articulate the strategic goals of the continent in the areas of economics, politics and security in the emerging multipolar order. Finally, it must also be stressed that despite the strategic importance of Africa in the current multipolar order system, the fact remains that Africa still faces numerous and daunting challenges, such as

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climate change, stunted economic growth and development, political corruption, human rights abuses, democratic backsliding, and imperialism.

Africa has seen 9 successful coup d'états since 2020. Are there any similarities across these countries that point to a democratic crisis in Africa?

Yes, there are similarities across all the countries where coups have taken place in Africa in the last five years. During this time, military intervention in African politics has become increasingly common, often serving as an alternative to democratic elections. Military juntas have emerged as one of the most prevalent forms of governance, representing a shift away from traditional Western models of institutional governance.

For example, consider the sudden unconstitutional overthrow of the democratically elected government of Mali in March 2012, Mauritania (August 2008), Guinea-Bissau (December 2008 and April 2012), and Niger (February 2010, July 2023), Burkina Faso (January 2022 and September 2022), Gabon (August 2023), The Gambia and the island nation of Sao Tome and Principe in 2021. All these instances leave many African leaders frustrated over how to stem the tide of this autocratic resurgence in Africa. The similarities in the behavior of military leaders and the countries that have experienced coups in sub-Saharan Africa over the past five years suggest the existence of a "putsch playbook." This approach reflects the ambitions of aspiring autocrats to consolidate power and maintain control for as long as possible. Emblematic of this approach is the fact that none of the military juntas in Niger, Burkina Faso, and Mali currently have specific transition dates to civilian government, with the exception of Gabon that recently transitioned to democratically elected government in April 2025 since after the coup in August 2023.

Did the COVID-19 pandemic play a role in diminishing democratic rule in Sub-Saharan Africa?

COVID-19 played a fundamental role in diminishing democratic rule in Sub-Saharan Africa. For example, before its outbreak in March 2020 and during the pandemic, a majority of the African countries (e.g. Somalia, Ethiopia and Sudan) were already struggling with political instability, insecurity, and economic dislocations, caused by the political corruption and lack of the rule of law. Similarly, before COVID-19, many African heads of state had violated term limits and rigged elections, which often resulted in electoral disputes, political assassination, and civil unrest. However, during and after the pandemic, many African states were caught in the fever trap of the COVID-19 economic shocks and stagnation, and the attendant effects of hunger, poverty, unemployment, mounting insecurity, and populism, which had triggered the coups in Burkina Faso, Chad, Gabon, Guinea, Mali, and Niger. Moreover, these effects provided greater leverage for postponing the elections in Uganda and Tanzania, causing serious political violations and the abuse of human rights due to the extended lockdowns and restrictions. Some of the poorest populations in countries such as Nigeria, Niger, Chad, Burkina Faso, and more, were often abandoned by their governments and made to cope with the various problems, pushing their ailing and fragile livelihoods towards further humanitarian catastrophe.

Based on your research on Nigerian-European Union relations, what key insights have you gained regarding Nigeria's strategic interests?

My research on Nigeria-European Union relations has provided me with key insights regarding the tenor and recalibration of Nigerian foreign policy and strategic interests, particularly since its return to civil democratic rule in 1999, which marked the end of nineteen years of military interregnum in the country. At that point, one of the major challenges faced by the Nigerian state was how to redirect its foreign policy and to reposition itself among the committee of nations. First, I would say that during the last two decades, Nigerian foreign policy and strategic relations with the EU and international community have been redirected from unilateralism to multilateralism towards the promotion of peace, security, and democracy in Africa. For example, given its regional clout in the West African sub-region, it has consistently deployed its multilateral diplomacy, using its military might to promote democracy in West Africa within both the regional (Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS)) and continental organizations (AU) in Africa. Whilst shaping the international community with its regional clout, it has consistently used its geostrategic location in the West African sub-region, population, military strength and endowed natural resources to pursue dynamic foreign policy objectives at the levels of the EU, taking on the role of guarantor and

gatekeeper of the EU's strategic interests in the Gulf of Guinea.

On the other hand, it must be stressed that Nigeria's strategic interests towards the EU, particularly within the international community, are currently being undermined by the erosion of democracy and constitutionality. One of the cardinal objectives of the EU's strategic interests in Nigeria and the Gulf of Guinea is the promotion of democracy, security, and development. However, Nigeria is currently at a crossroads with regard to the lack of democratic cultures across the three tiers of government – executive, legislature, and judiciary. For example, the illegal suspension of Senator Natasha Akpoti-Uduaghan for six months, following a sexual allegation against Nigerian Senate President Godswill Akpabio, has sparked widespread national and international condemnation. Critics argued that the suspension violated democratic principles, disregarded the rule of law, and reflected a violation for women's fundamental rights in Nigeria. The Nigerian Senate has faced ridicule for its handling of the allegation and failure to uphold proper democratic procedures. The suspension of Senator Apoti-Uduaghan by the Nigerian Senate under the leadership of the Nigerian Senate President (who was also the presiding officer on the case) is a brazen constitutional breach, demonstrating an abuse of power and systemic corruption which undermines the legitimacy of the Nigerian law making body in advancing democracy, the rule of law and fundamental human rights. Since these aims are part of the cardinal strategic objectives of the EU in Nigeria, it is evident that the effects of such crises greatly undermine Nigeria-EU relations.

How did Omar Bashir's coup-proofing strategies in Sudan impact regime stability?

Coup-proofing strategies simply imply the Machiavellian and anti-coup mechanisms deployed by the authoritarian and autocratic leaders from the Global South to strengthen their regimes against attacks or military coups. This action has been used primarily for the purpose of regime stability in both democracies and hybrid regimes in the Global South. For example, in Africa, Presidents Yoweri Museveni of Uganda, Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe, Pual Biya of Cameroon, Alpha Condé of Guinea, Bola Ahmed Tinubu of Nigeria, Charles Taylor of Liberia, and Omar al-Bashir of Sudan, had all deployed coup-proofing actions, such as creating paramilitary institutions, enforcing ethnic stacking within the military, and engaging in corruption to weaken the military and prevent them from carrying out a military coup.

Coup-proofing action may be viewed as a weaponized strategy by autocratic leaders, though with implications on the regime that coup-proofs. For example, the inability of the military to stop the uprising that eventually led to the December Revolution of 2019 in Sudan resulted in Omar al-Bashir's removal by his former military officers from the same ethnic group that felt dissatisfied with his regime. Furthermore, Hosni Mubarak of Egypt was removed from office in 2011 because police welfare conditions were prioritised by the regime over the deterioration of working conditions of the Egyptian army that was supposed to protect Mubarak's regime in the wake of the massive protests across Egypt. I would conclude that coup-proofing strategies have been effective strategies used by most authoritarian or autocratic leaders for regime elongation in the Global South, but also have implications and consequences for democratization and political development in regions where they are being practiced.

What will be the biggest challenge in African security in the years to come?

The biggest challenge in African security in the near future will be persistent and imminent dissatisfaction with governments across the continent, leading to political instability induced by coups, dissatisfaction with civilian governments, and regional disintegration. Consequently, the future trends of these factors will be collectively reinforcing, and African security outcomes will be impacted in various ways.

First, the African political landscape will continue to be characterized and punctuated by the rising waves of coups, reinforced by the lack of free and fair elections, economic dislocation, and rising insecurity. Popular protests and civil movements for democracy and against autocracy will remain under pressure to challenge the status quo. For example, the slated elections for 2025 in Gabon, Tanzania, Cameroon, and Côte d'Ivoire, and Nigeria in 2027, may be an electoral exercise in futility, as these elections are not expected to bring about the desired change and credibility, despite the promise of electoral reforms via the use of technologies to reduce electoral malpractices. The multiplier effects of these challenges are the collective revolts and resistance from the liberation movements and the

youth, as well as the spontaneous resurgence of repressive actions from the security forces to clamp down protesters, further snowballing into civil unrest and political conflict.

Second, frustration and dissatisfaction with authoritarian or civilian governments can trigger insurrection and conflict. Persistent and growing extremist organisations in the wider Sahel, Horn of Africa, Central Africa, and other parts of the continent – that experts claim are caused by weak governance, corruption, democratic deficit, and human rights violations – are likely to persist and exacerbate the humanitarian crises and instability across Africa. Jihadist fighters in the Sahel and secessionist agitations as well as youth protests in Nigeria, Mali, Cameroon, Kenya, Ethiopia, and beyond, are likely to continue in the region.

Lastly, the 50-year-old West African bloc, ECOWAS, has been weakened, and has suffered polarisation and exacerbated insecurity, following the abrupt exit of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger from the bloc, posing significant risks to the United States and Europe's strategic interests in the West African sub-region. The continuing collapse of the international coalition on counterterrorism support, as well the failure of the political leadership in regional efforts to end poverty, has created a vacuum in which the deadly Jihadist fighters will continue to fester in the region. Similarly, the current isolationist American policy towards Africa under Trump, and the rising influence of Russia and China in the "coup belt", poses significant threats to democratisation and "Western" influence in the region, as well as African security, in the years to come. However, what to watch for is whether the call for the inclusion of Africa as a permanent member of the UN Security Council will be achieved, particularly as a way to end the protracted deadly conflicts, political instability and underdevelopment in Africa.

How do you view the role of international institutions in addressing security challenges in Africa?

The role of international institutions in addressing security challenges in Africa is vital to African stability and that of the global order at large. With the support of the UN, the AU is responsible for the maintenance of peace and security, monitoring human rights and democracy, as well as promoting economic development in conflict-affected zones on the continent. However, for the last two decades since the establishment of the AU, it has made some positive progress in the maintenance of peace and security across the continent through the creation of the African Standby Force (ASF) in 2005. For example, after the transformation of the OAU into the AU in 2001, the AU has been responsible for mediating various internecine conflicts on the continent of Africa, against the backdrop of the entrenchment of the Principle of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) by the United Nations in its Charter in 2005. Furthermore, the AU, under the auspices of the Peace and Security Council (PSC), and the support of the United Nations and other international coalitions, successfully formed and led the AU Missions in Burundi (2003) and Darfur (2004) and Somalia (2007). On the other hand, some of the challenges facing the AU has been the failure of member states to speak with one voice in matters affecting the continent. The polarization among the member states have hampered the Union in resolving most of the conflicts that are currently going on across the continent. As a continental organization, the AU has been inefficient in condemning the level of human rights abuses, militarization of governance, and other atrocities being carried out against their citizens. The inefficiency on the part of the AU to uphold and promote democratic freedom and justice in Africa, as part of the cardinal principles of the UN, seriously casts doubts on its ability to be admitted into the UN Security Council. Another major challenge facing the AU has been the lack of funding to perform its mandate. The organization relies majorly on foreign financial assistance for its operations. However, reliance on foreign aid by the AU can be counterproductive. For example, the recent pulse of foreign aid by the United States to African countries, especially due to the shift in foreign policy, priorities, and alleged corruption, has led to a serious decline in the funding of critical areas such as health, humanitarian assistance, economic development, and concerns about the ability of Africa to live without foreign aid. To overcome this challenge, Africa must be ready to fight corruption and prioritize its resources for growth and development.

What is the most important piece of advice you could give to young scholars of international relations?

Every scholar in every profession or discipline has an impetus which underpins and drives their interests. So, my advice to young scholars in the field of international relations would be to study what interests and drives them the most in the field. Always bear in mind that the world we live in is not static but changes according to human nature. Don't force your ideas or opinions on another person, but always present your case or arguments in an objective

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manner to the outside world.