

Obama's melodies may need some fine-tuning

When the trumpeter blew his horn on Saturday afternoon welcoming President Barack Obama to Ghana, he responded rhythmically by saying: “I like this.”

22 Jul 2009 06:00 Bhekinkosi Moyo

When the trumpeter blew his horn on Saturday afternoon welcoming President Barack Obama to Ghana, he responded rhythmically by saying: ‘I like this.’

He went on to sing his own governance melody very well. But will African leaders dance to his music? It does not look likely.

Just a few weeks ago, African heads decided that their members should not cooperate with the International Criminal Court in the arrest and surrender of Sudan’s President Omar al-Bashir.

In short, his music is sweet indeed, but the dancers are likely to inflict scratches on it. But if highlighting governance achievements was the main reason for his visit, wouldn’t he have done better to visit one of the conflict-ridden countries such as Somalia, Sudan, Zimbabwe, Guinea or even Kenya?

To a certain extent, Obama’s administration chose the easiest way to address the theme of governance by opting for the already converted. Hence conspirators argue that Obama’s visit was tied to Ghana’s recently discovered oil.

‘Get your act together’ was Obama’s translucent message to African leaders, delivered to the Ghanaian parliament just before he made an emotional trip to the Cape Coast Castle—a place instrumental in the transatlantic slave trade.

His message was music to many who have suffered under the tyranny of dictators. Obama’s sweet melodies connected good governance with development.

His strong message to African leaders who trample on the freedoms of their people was: ‘Now make no mistake: history is on the side of brave Africans, not with those who use coups or change constitutions to stay in power. Africa does not need strong men; it needs strong institutions.’ That Africans are responsible

for their destiny is a musical note that fits well in his melody.

It is important that Obama sings this simple note—for far too many years, development agents and Western governments have treated Africa and its people as helpless victims. Obama's administration must give agency to Africans and relegate the United States to a partnership status.

There is no better place for this than in Africa, where the youth constitute at least 75% of the population. Most of the problematic octogenarians are very close to death. The importance of this is that it also recognises Africa's position in global power play.

Africa is an important region for the world's superpowers and emerging powers in terms of natural resources and geopolitics. Obama is right in observing that the '21st century will also be shaped by what happens in Africa".

Africans must therefore push hard in international platforms for principles of equality, partnership and mutuality. But although Obama sang very well, his melodies were at times discordant. It was difficult to harmonise his emphasis on equality with his elevation as super-instructor.

His speech had the tone of someone giving instructions either to children or a group of tired sportsmen or women. Linked to this, I could not help but be confused on the Saturday morning when Obama had breakfast with President John Evans Atta Mills.

The two presidents arrived in the same vehicle—the American car popularly known as the Beast. Why didn't they use the Ghanaian presidential car? I wondered who was in charge of Ghana at that moment. Clearly the Americans temporarily took over Ghana.

My journalist friends staying at the Protea hotel were threatened with eviction simply because the Americans wanted rooms for Obama's people. At the La Palm hotel, where I stayed, there were threats as well to many of us who had booked a long time before Obama's visit. So hotels preferred Americans to Africans.

All this is discordant to Obama's melody. But it must serve as a word of caution to future hosts of Obama in Africa, such as South Africa during the 2010 World Cup. His visit should not trample on individuals' basic rights.

Dr Bhekinkosi Moyo is head of programmes at TrustAfrica, a pan- African foundation based in Dakar, Senegal

All material © Mail & Guardian Online. Material may not be published or reproduced in any form without prior written permission.