

## A Response from Dr. Daniel Mengara to Her Excellency Cynthia Akuetteh, Ambassador of the United States to Gabon and Sao Tome and Principe

January 16, 2015

Excellency:

First allow me, on my personal behalf and on the behalf of the Gabonese people, to extend to you the welcome of our nation and congratulate you on your recent appointment as the new Ambassador of the United States to both the Republic of Gabon and the Democratic Republic of Sao Tome and Principe.

But allow me also, Madam Ambassador, to express not only the outrage of the Gabonese expatriate community living in the United States, but also the indignation of the Gabonese people as a whole at the very troubling remarks you made in your January 12, 2015 statement to the people of Gabon. As both a scholar and professor who teaches at an American university and an activist who is the President of the exiled "Bongo Doit Partir" (Bongo Must Go) movement, a movement that, for the past 16 years, has been active combatting the despotic regime of the Bongo family, I see your declaration as both unacceptable and worrisome. Ultimately, your statement, I fear, will be perceived by many as a bad joke, and perhaps even as an insult to the Gabonese people who have been, for the past 47 years, grappling with the infamous dictatorship of the Bongo dynasty. And so I must respectfully, but also very vehemently, disagree with your assessment of the political situation in Gabon.

Thus:

When your Excellency asserts that *"the United States will firmly condemn any attempt to change the government via extra-constitutional means,"* and that *"calls for insurrection or violence are reprehensible and unacceptable,"* it is my sincere belief that you and your advisors did not fully weigh the negative impact that such statements may have on the Gabonese people's aspirations for a political system that will champion and promote the values of democracy and human rights that have eluded them ever since the Bongo family came to power in 1967.

Worse still, in your statement you are basically denying the Gabonese people a fundamental right that, paradoxically, is enshrined in the American "Declaration of Independence," a declaration that has been the bedrock of America's political heritage since 1776; in other words, a declaration that rightly champions the universal principle that *"all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness."*

Granted: you oppose the "extra-constitutional means" that a people such as Gabon's might use to change its government, Madam Ambassador, but, surely, should you not, beforehand, define what type of constitution and what type of country you are talking about? Surely, you do not believe for a single second that Gabon is a democracy built upon a constitutional covenant resulting from a national consensus, do you? What therefore, according to you, is more "extra-constitutional": a regime such as that of the Bongos that changes the constitution at will to ensure its survival in power ad infinitum, or a people such as ours that is simply seeking to restore the very universal, unalienable rights to life, opportunity, liberty, justice and happiness that the existing Constitution has restricted, limited and, ultimately, destroyed? Have you even really taken the time to read the Gabonese Constitution, Madam? Can you read it and then look the Gabonese people in the eye and still assert that you, an American citizen, would be satisfied living under a legal/political system that allows the same family, the same clan, to rule your country potentially for 70 years or more in a context where you, as a citizen, have no constitutional or legal ability to change your government via free, fair and democratic elections?

I further wonder, Madam Ambassador, whether you have actually also taken some time yet to look at the human rights reports that are published annually by the very State Department that your Embassy reports to? In these assessments, the State Department has consistently, year after year, just as it does in its very latest 2013 report, described Gabon as a country characterized by *"use of excessive force by police; an inefficient judiciary subject to government influence; restrictions on privacy and the press; harassment and extortion of African immigrants and refugees; widespread government corruption; violence against women; societal discrimination against women, noncitizen Africans, Pygmies, and persons with HIV/AIDS; trafficking in persons, particularly children; and forced child labor."* The report even goes so far as to assert that *"the constitution and law prohibit arbitrary arrest and detention, but the government did not always observe these prohibitions. Security forces arbitrarily arrested university students and irregular immigrants during the year,"* and that *"the government suspended several newspapers and television stations"* and did not *"always respect the right of peaceful assembly."*

Does this sound to you, Madam Ambassador, as a country in which you would like to live, a country which you would be proud to say you are a citizen of, a country that you would trust to organize free and fair elections that would reflect the right of the people to freely chose and change their government? And, with regards to the denial of the “*right to peaceful assembly*,” should I point out to you that, as recently as December 20<sup>th</sup>, 2014, the Bongo regime coldly shot one student to death and seriously injured a number of other citizens who had tried to protest peacefully at a rally in the Rio neighborhood in Libreville? As the media have fully shown, this unprovoked attack by the government on peaceful and unarmed demonstrators was done preemptively, meaning that the demonstrators were violently dispersed by the police before they were even given a chance to gather, and before they had engaged in any sort of reprehensible acts, thus leading to the clashes that resulted in the shooting murder of student Bruno Mboulou Beka and the arrest of several demonstrators who, as a consequence, became political prisoners, prisoners of opinion, prisoners of conscience. In other words, these clashes and tragedies occurred only as a result of government repression and provocation, nothing else. And should I mention journalists Jonas Moulenda and Désiré Ename who have had to flee the country recently and seek asylum abroad for fear of government persecution?

The Gabonese people, Madam Ambassador, will certainly scoff at your statement that “*Gabon has long been a model of stability in a fragile region*,” and that “*the Gabonese people are proud of this legacy*.” Really, Madam Ambassador? Let it be said, however, that I do somewhat take solace from the fact that you failed to qualify Gabon as a “model of DEMOCRATIC stability in the region.” This makes a big difference. I am sure Libya, Syria, Tunisia, Egypt, and Burkina Faso were also “models of stability” in their regions, yet the United States supported the overthrow of dictators who had taken these countries hostage. I wonder why. Today China, Russia, and many other democracy-averse dictatorships are also undisputed “models of stability,” but does that mean, Excellency, that you would oppose attempts by citizens of these countries to overthrow constitutions and institutions that were designed to keep them under the yoke of despotism and injustice?

And when you add, further, Madam Ambassador, that “*any political change must occur via democratic means*” and that “*Gabon will organize elections in 2016. Those who aspire to rule Gabon in the next phase of its history will have to focus on the electoral process and prepare for competition on the basis of a positive vision for the future and adherence to the Gabonese laws and the international norms of transparency*,” I wonder whether you may not have overstepped your role a little bit? My humble sentiment is that it is probably not your prerogative to dictate to the Gabonese people what process they should use to change their dictatorial government. One thing is, indeed, to advocate for peace and dialogue as diplomatic etiquette dictates—and no one will fault you for that—but another is to basically become a complicit advocate of the status quo by forcefully ramming down the throats of the Gabonese people a propagandist line that has been used for the past 47 years by the Bongo regime to maintain the status quo of their dictatorship over the nation!

It would seem to me, Madam Ambassador, that the Constitution you are asking the Gabonese people to adhere to is the very same constitution that, ultimately, will inevitably force the Gabonese people to seek those very “extra-constitutional means” that you seem to oppose. When you do take the time to leave your office and talk to the Gabonese man and woman in the street, you will quickly realize that no one believes in Gabon that the government can be changed via elections. The man and woman in the street will tell you that they do not believe in the electoral process because the Gabonese constitution as well as the electoral arsenal put in place by the Bongo clan are custom-made to ensure the permanency of the Bongo regime.

The political history of Gabon, Madam Ambassador, will further tell you that from 1968 to 1990, Gabon went through an undemocratic one-party system that for 22 years sustained the dictatorship of Omar Bongo over the country. When, between 1981 and 1990, exiled and local political activists of the Mouvement de Redressement National (MORENA) began to courageously ask for democratic change via a combination of clandestine and public demonstrations, Omar Bongo violently repressed these political aspirations. It is only after the Gabonese people took to the streets in 1990 to demand democracy and, therefore, had to act “extra-constitutionally” that they were able to force the Bongo regime to agree to a National Conference that brought back multi-party politics to Gabon.

The Constitution that was born out of the national consensus of 1990 limited the presidential terms of office to a maximum of two consecutive terms of 5 years each and provided for the principle of run-off elections, among others. Yet, between 1990 and 2005, Omar Bongo had already managed to undo all the democratic gains of the 1990 National Conference, changed the constitution back to a seven-year term of office instead of five, instituted unlimited terms to ensure his life presidency, eliminated the principle of run-off elections and, ultimately, paved the way not only for his life presidency, but also for the easing of his adopted son into power upon his death. And when, upon his death, his son fraudulently came to power in 2009, he changed the Constitution again and further reinforced the dictatorial legacy of his father. Gabon, like many other countries in Africa, became a country where, paradoxically, there was multiparty-politics, but without democracy: therein, elections are held indeed, but the chances of alternation of power are nil. The electoral process is so rigged and corrupt that it guarantees only one outcome: the “victory” of the Bongos and their regime. Hence a National

Assembly in Gabon that is dominated by the ruling party by a ratio of 114 members against only 6 who are not from the ruling party. And this leaves the Gabonese people with only one alternative: either take to the streets as they did in 1990 in order to obtain the immediate change they seek or simply resign themselves to the status quo.

But I also wish to say to you here, Madam Ambassador, that as a Black American woman who, moreover, is married to an African man from Kwame Nkrumah's great nation of Ghana, you should know better. Your Excellency is, in my humble opinion, falling prey to the old paradigms, the old paternalistic view of the colonialists, a view that, in the words of former French President Jacques Chirac, considers democracy to be "a luxury for Africans," a view of Africa that, ultimately, urges the Africans, as you do here unfortunately, to satisfy themselves with the parodies of democracies that their dictators have been serving them since the independence period. That view is, at best, demeaning and dehumanizing, and, at worst, racist: it encourages the Africans to agree to the types of cheap arrangements that no Westerner would ever consider living under.

This is probably why the United States' State Department often has a hard time reconciling the language and principle of law, as is apparent in its 2013 human rights report where it paradoxically writes that "*the constitution and law provide citizens the right to change their government peacefully, and citizens **PARTIALLY EXERCISED** this right through periodic and generally fair elections.*" I must point out here that there is no such thing as a "partial exercise" of constitutional or human rights. Such characterizations, which find acceptable such situations as "citizens partially exercising" their right to change their government, are an abomination and should be barred from State Department terminology. Either those rights are there or they are not. Either they are absolute or they are not. Either they are respected, asserted and protected or they are not. Where human rights are partially expressed or partially protected, they do not, de facto, exist at all.

And so the fundamental question becomes, Madam Ambassador: would you, as an American citizen today, be satisfied with being ruled by the same president for 42 years (Omar Bongo), then see that president die in power after leaving behind a constitution that would ease his son (Ali Bongo) into power, thus paving the way for a quasi dynastic rule whereby power is passed on from parents to children for what could well end up becoming 70 years at least if Ali Bongo holds power for 28 years as can be expected? Would you, as an American citizen, agree to that? If your answer to this question is "no," then why would you expect the Gabonese people to basically bend over and agree to your advice, an advice that encourages them to renounce their freedom and to participate submissively in elections whose outcome is known in advance? Considering the fact that the Gabonese constitution as it stands today is basically the very same "anti-democracy" document that has allowed the Bongo family to stay in power for the past 47 years, it seems to me that the same circumstances that made it impossible for the Gabonese people to change their government peacefully and freely over the past 47 years will be the exact same circumstances that will prevent them from doing so again in 2016! As they say in physics, the same causes always produce the same effects.

In the end, Madam Ambassador, I fear that the perception that your statement will leave in the eyes, hearts and minds of the Gabonese people is that you support the status quo of dictatorship in Gabon. And this is highly regrettable and scary, but also revolting, in so many ways.

And so, ultimately, it seems to me utterly clear that:

Had you been the Ambassador of the United States to Gabon in 1990, you would have probably discouraged the aspirations for democracy of the Gabonese people and advised them to abide by the dictatorial "constitutionality" of the Bongo Ondimba regime, and the Gabonese people today would still be under the yoke of the one-party system if they had listened to you. What a scary thought, Madam Ambassador!

Had the courageous Africans who fought for their independences in the 1950s and 1960s listened to an advice such as yours, Excellency, no African nation would be independent today, Africans would have remained under the yoke of colonialism, the very country named Gabon where you were recently sent to as a U.S. Ambassador would not exist and would still be a part of a French territory governed and administered by a French governor, and the Gabonese people would still be suffering torture, discrimination, forced labor and other inhumanities under the infamous "Code de l'indigénat" that perpetuated slavery in Francophone Africa under the guise of the civilizing mission of the colonial state! What a scary thought, Madam Ambassador!

Had the citizens of Burkina Faso heeded an advice such as yours and, thus, waited until their dictator was quietly done once again mutilating their constitution with impunity in order to prolong his infamous and "stable" reign of terror, Blaise Compaoré would probably still be the "beloved" Comrade Dictator President of Burkina Faso, and for years to come! What a scary thought, Madam Ambassador!

And should I mention Nelson Mandela, the very Mandela who was once called a “terrorist” at the darkest hour of the Apartheid system, and who later became the world’s hero? Would you have told him to be quiet and let his people suffer the indignities of racial segregation forever? I think I have said enough.

Your position, Madam Ambassador, is, in this regard, alas, very much unlike one of your predecessors’, namely Eunice Reddick, herself another female African American ambassador who, as the diplomatic cables uncovered by Wikileaks in 2011 revealed, fully embraced the Gabonese aspirations for an immediate change and pushed for democratic reforms in Gabon. In this I stand rather personally disappointed to see a descendant of those who suffered the worst holocaust that has ever befallen humankind, and who fought for their freedoms against all odds, encourage her people to bow their heads before their oppressor.

In other words, Madam Ambassador, had Martin Luther King and those other dauntless black and white heroes of the American Civil Rights Movement listened to an advice such as yours, there would be today no **BLACK WOMAN** named Cynthia Akuetteh being sent to Gabon as an Ambassador of the United States of America and Black Americans would still be waiting for the time when their oppressors would willingly decide to desegregate them. And this could have probably taken another century of slavery, discrimination and disenfranchisement! What a scary thought, Madam Ambassador!

And so it seems to me, Madam Ambassador, that, in urging the Gabonese people to patiently wait for the 2016 elections, you are in direct contradiction with the whole American Civil Rights Movement and, in particular, with Martin Luther King who, in his « Letter from Birmingham Jail » in 1963 wrote: *“I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro’s great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen’s Councilor or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate, who is more devoted to “order” than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says: “I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I cannot agree with your methods of direct action”; who paternalistically believes he can set the timetable for another man’s freedom; who lives by a mythical concept of time and who constantly advises the Negro to wait for a “more convenient season”*

Are you, Madam Ambassador, this “white moderate” (even if in black skin) whom King is alluding to in his letter, the one who thinks himself capable of setting “the timetable of another man’s freedom,” the one seeking to delay the inevitable, the one seeking to compromise the humanity of a whole race, a whole nation, the one who prefers the unjust “order” and “stability” of an unjust government to the unfettered affirmation of justice for all at all costs?

But there is more. Dr. King, in the same letter, adds the following, Madam Ambassador: *“We should never forget that everything Adolf Hitler did in Germany was “legal” and everything the Hungarian freedom fighters did in Hungary was “illegal.” It was “illegal” to aid and comfort a Jew in Hitler’s Germany. Even so, I am sure that, had I lived in Germany at the time, I would have aided and comforted my Jewish brothers. **IF TODAY I LIVED IN A COMMUNIST COUNTRY WHERE CERTAIN PRINCIPLES DEAR TO THE CHRISTIAN FAITH ARE SUPPRESSED, I WOULD OPENLY ADVOCATE DISOBEYING THAT COUNTRY’S ANTIRELIGIOUS LAWS.**”*

What, thus, is your role going to be, Madam Ambassador, in the context of the Gabonese people’s quest for justice and dignity? Are you going to side with Dr. King and the Gabonese people in order to oppose the misleading “legality” of an unjust government that has taken its people hostage for the past 47 years (almost half a century!), and thus “openly advocate disobeying” that country’s unjust laws, or are you, rather, going to side with the oppressors who have made it their goal to dehumanize a whole nation?

Excellency, I must leave you with one last thought from Dr. Martin Luther King. In his “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” he says, *“we know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed.”* At a time when the Gabonese people are getting ready to break the chains of oppression, why would you want to oppose this longing, Madam Ambassador? Why would you oppose this when you know very well from the point of view of history that the Executive Board of the NAACP confirmed the principle of resistance to oppression in 1965 when it warned that *“If Federal troops are not made available to protect the rights of Negroes, then the American people are faced with terrible alternatives. Like the citizens of Nazi-occupied France, Negroes must either submit to the heels of their oppressors or they must organize underground to protect themselves from the oppression of Governor Wallace and his storm troopers”?*

This warning, I am sure you are aware, had come the day after the first Selma-to-Montgomery march had been violently repressed, thus leading to the events that tragically came to be known as “Bloody Sunday.” Yet, this bloody repression, with its water hoses, its live ammunitions, its attack dogs, its batons, its humiliations, etc., did not stop the “insurrectional movement” that the American Civil Rights Movement had become. On the contrary. And it is probably because the white establishment of the time had found too dangerous for the status quo the engine of the “black insurrection” that Martin Luther King had become that he was assassinated. To put an end to the “menace” of liberty, the menace of liberty for all,

the very liberty that the American Negro sought to attain.

Madam Ambassador, Gabon has been going through its own “bloody Sundays” for the past 47 years! And so I ask you again, Excellency: what would you, as an American citizen, do if you knew that the electoral process in your country would never, ever, allow you and your people to peacefully and freely change your government because of the “constitutionality” of laws obviously tailor-made to oppress and deprive you of the right to, precisely, change your government? Would that not be cause for a legitimate attempt to use “extra-constitutional means” if such means, as the American Civil Rights Movement demonstrated, are for the purpose of repairing and rehabilitate the social contract that must unite the citizens around a common goal, a common vision for the good of the nation?

And so I say, Madam Ambassador, that the Gabonese people fundamentally disagree with you. Just as the members of the American Civil Rights Movement did—that is, those very people who, from Selma to Washington, they forced president Johnson to push for a refurbished federal Voting Rights Act that, beginning in 1965, paved the way for a more dignified humanity for the millions of disenfranchised Negroes who were being arbitrarily deprived not only of their human dignity, but also of their right to vote in a still racially segregated America—the Gabonese people will march on.

Yes, Madam Ambassador, the Gabonese people will march on. They will no wait longer wait. They can't wait anymore. They agree with Martin Luther King and President Barack Obama that they must be the change they seek, that dignity is not something that can be delayed, that they can no longer wait for the “more convenient season” you are asking them to wait for. They waited 47 years already. They are tired of waiting.

And because of their staunch belief in the founding principles of the American nation—but also the faith they have placed in President Barack Obama's 2009 Accra speech where at the time he said that we “*must start from the simple premise that Africa's future is up to Africans;*” that “*to build a prosperous future, Africa needs to shed corruption and tyranny and take on poverty and disease;*” that “*These things can only be done if you take responsibility for your future;*” that “*it won't be easy. It will take time and effort. There will be suffering and setbacks,*” but “*America will be with you every step of the way, as a partner, as a friend.*”—the Gabonese people will march on.

And this is why we, the Gabonese people, continue to believe, Madam Ambassador, that America is the friend, not of the Bongo Ondimba regime, but of the Gabonese people. And so, just as the great heroic Negro Americans of the Civil Rights Movement did when they conquered, in the streets of America, their dignity, the Gabonese people will march on.

They will march on empty-handed and bare feet, armed only with their conviction for immediate freedom as their only weapon. They will not stumble. Not before the police and military force that the oppressive regime of the Bongo family is poised to unleash upon them in its vain attempt to suppress the most fundamental aspirations of the people. Not before the wall erected before them by those who urge them to accept parodies of democracy, that is, ultimately, the political and human bastardization of the African continent.

Like the Selma marchers who conquered the rights of the Negro to vote, we will march on... We will march on because we know that the American president, Barack Obama himself, as a black man, knows the sacrifices of those who had struggled before him; that he knows that he, as the first black president of the United States, was made possible only because those who had marched on before him had ignored the calls of those who urged them not to defy the authority of the white racist establishment, to abide by the unjust and dehumanizing laws of America's racial segregation system.

We will march on because we know President Obama promised he would be on the side of the African peoples whenever they showed him they really wanted change. This is what they did in Libya, this is what they did in Tunisia, this is what they did in Burkina Faso, and in all those instances America stood by the Africans and supported their right to decide and define their own destiny, the right to change their government via “extra-constitutional means.” And so we are convinced America will also stand by the Gabonese people when they decide, just as Black Americans did in the United States, to use “extra-constitutional means” to undo the unjust laws of the unjust government of the Bongos, that very government that has, for 47 years, murdered, traumatized and impoverished its people for half a century now.

This is why the Gabonese people will continue to march on, Madam Ambassador... for we can't wait anymore.

And we shall overcome!

Happy New Year to you and to all those who are dear to you, Excellency.

Sincerely,

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