

Why Africans Reject AFRICOM

- West Africa Insight
- March 2011 Water

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On the 4th of March 2011, the Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD) held a seminar on 'Political Economy of African Responses to the U.S Africa Command.' The session witnessed an exposition on the rationale and background on the United States Government's Africa Command, the Department of Defence, DOD's rationalisation of the command, Africans' reactions to the establishment of the command, and the political economy explanation for those reactions. Dr. Carl LeVan, Assistant Professor of the American University, Washington DC, delivered the presentation.

It would be recalled that in 2007, US President, George W Bush had announced the conception of a new military command for Africa known as AFRICOM. Surprisingly the proposed plan received a wide range of negative responses. While some African governments were diplomatic on the subject, others and their press have never sat on the fence on the matter. Dr Carl LeVan's research was a content analysis of over 500 newspaper articles on the subject, specifically from the African continent, correlated with economic growth in the various countries where the articles were published.

His study was prompted by the overwhelming absence of studies on consequences of economic prosperity, against the abundance of studies on the causes of economic growth. Twenty-two African countries without oil, he noted, have maintained about 2% growth since 2000 compared to -0.7% in 1990s. When countries do well, what are their consequences on foreign policy? Citing leading newspapers from South Africa, Kenya and Nigeria that had bluntly urged their government to reject the proposal to have AFRICOM's headquarters on African soil, and others like Liberia that expressed unbridled support for it, the study posited that countries with favourable economic growth were more hostile to AFRICOM while low-growth economies tended to support AFRICOM and even offer to serve as headquarters for it.

According to Dr LeVan, the debate and the scepticisms bother mostly around the "areas of responsibilities" and several factors that might have precipitated the negative response from Africa; chief among which has been whether the intended plan is a change or continuity in US policy? While the DOD had maintained that the later is not the case, certain factors and statements appeared to contradict same.

The DOD had argued against the notion that the proposal was based on its interest in counterterrorism brewing from Africa and China's growing influence in the region and securing access to oil. Some analysts rather, attributing the negative responses to 'public relations blunder', claimed the DOD did not do a good job of its roll out campaign. Ironically, LeVan contended, scholars, Americans inclusive, have countered that PR-blunder analysis of the problem with AFRICOM, arguing that it is not a message problem but rather a mission problem.

After the half-hour presentation, some of the questions and discussions dwelt on the operationalisation of aid dependence. Professor Abdulhameed Ujo commented on limitations of the content analysis as methodology in African political science research and conclusion based on economic variables. West Africa Insight editor Odoh Diego Okenyodo, who chaired the session, also

talked about the limitations of media reports in Africa heavily influenced by moneybags with insular interests, and unavailability of editorial contents on the internet for search, as some newspapers maintain different web and print copies while others have no websites.

In conclusion, Dr LeVan asserted that tests on alternative explanation for African responses based on a political-economy hypothesis African politics remains embedded within economic relations, premised on the realisation that most aid-dependent countries with high level of US foreign aid had and were likely to support AFRICOM.

The seminar which commenced by 11am at the CDD Conference room had about twenty participants in attendance, including Professor Ebere Onwudiwe, Professor Abdulhameed Ujo and Dr Jibrin Ibrahim, political scientist and Director of CDD.