

How Africa, the 'continent of the future', can help the US President to rebuild a fractured and sullied America.

A Letter to President Biden

IVOR AT
LARGE

Ivor Ichikowitz



Dear President Biden,

Systemic inequality. Rampant infectious disease. Post-electoral chaos incited by a sitting Head of State. A violent attempt at insurrection.

It is difficult to comprehend that I am referring to the United States in 2021. Nonetheless, I have faith in your ability to address the gravity of the challenges your Administration faces.

Despite its complexities, including social injustices compounded by the prolonged economic impact of Covid-19, Africa remains in admiration of America.

Many Africans live and breathe under fragile democracies; we understand the importance of fighting for the preservation of democratic principles.

I am confident that your Administration will unify the American populace and exemplify inclusive leadership; promoting democratic values which we Africans see as the best of America and what we are striving to emulate.

Your ambition to reassert American stewardship around the world, doing so as a part of the global community and not as an outsider, is most admirable. From your commitment to greater collaboration with the World Health Organisation (WHO), to rejoining the Paris

Agreement, to shoring up American support for your partners in NATO, America's allies welcome the return of a US which takes a more pragmatic position on the world stage.

Despite the challenges you must address as you assume office, I urge you not to downplay the priority of African engagement, like so many before you have.

I also request that you do not focus America's engagement with Africa solely to counterbalance the inroads of China, although it may be tempting to gloss over our continent in such a way. Contending with the influence of China abroad has been one of the few initiatives that has drawn bipartisan support in Washington DC, with Sino-African trade today reaching over \$200bn per year.

To quote your campaign slogan, one doesn't 'Build Back Better' by ignoring China's ground-game on the continent. However, while Africa looks to redefine its own destiny, and reevaluate its foreign policy priorities with refreshed perspective, America must do the same.

Extraordinary market power

Africa's extraordinary market power and potential for greater intercontinental collaboration has drawn competition among foreign

companies and governments looking to strengthen ties with our continent.

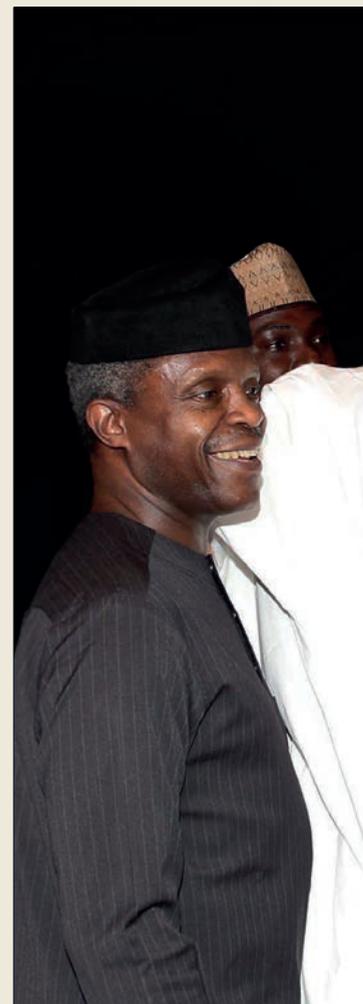
This 'New Scramble for Africa' presents us with historic opportunities and this time, we are well positioned at the negotiating table to be the main beneficiaries.

Mr President, Africa has been looking elsewhere for partnership. We know taking this road might go against our political and economic self-interest, compromise our aspirations for rising independently and sustainably; however, up to now, we've had no viable alternative.

Africa's leaders want to believe that you will reaffirm American support for our continent's economic growth; that you will choose to build mutually beneficial partnerships with Africa as a US foreign policy priority.

In particular, I refer to the Young African Leaders Initiative previously instituted by President Obama, and hope that you will reassure his steer towards fostering greater diversity within the US diplomatic service with regards to African engagement and to reassessing foreign direct investment (FDI) priorities in tandem with our leaders, state on state.

Initiatives like these, much like Prosper Africa and similar programmes enacted by previous Administrations, should be encour-



aged, so long as they do not impose straitjackets on the policies and agendas of the African countries taking part.

Your Administration also has a seasoned understanding of the threats to African security and stability – such as, extremist violence throughout Africa’s Sahel, terrorism in northern Mozambique and the tragic civil strife which took shape in Ethiopia as 2020 drew to a close. (See pages 42-45.)

Much like uncontrollable migration in the face of climate change, these remain highly exportable threats. These are security challenges that can only be checked at their foundations through support for an effective, modern and thus

Below: Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg (2nd r), who believes “the future will be made in Africa”, posing for a selfie with Nigeria’s President Muhammadu Buhari (c) and Vice President Yemi Osinbajo (l), during a visit to the presidential palace in Abuja



highly capable defence industrial complex, nation on nation in Africa.

There is room for lasting partnership in this arena also, which Africa’s leaders would not soon forget.

Empowering African youth

You noted that the US should not miss the opportunity to engage Africa’s youth; that America should prioritise economic growth in Africa by empowering young Africans and starting urbanisation initiatives in major African cities, as examples.

Our 2020 African Youth Survey indicated a resolve for such economic growth to flourish across the continent, with its single-largest-youth demographic – having the only youth population in the world that is still growing. The findings revealed rising Afro-optimism, a post-colonial mindset and confidence in a shared African identity.

The findings from the youth of our 1.3bn population (set to double by 2050), also revealed that 74% of those polled perceive that the US regularly impacts African affairs; 83% contending that such influence is positive – the highest for all foreign powers surveyed.

American companies and goods remain automatically perceived as high quality and are welcomed. This gives the US a major advantage in any heightened engagement with Africa. African youths share with Americans the ambitions of Silicon Valley – Nairobi is recognised today as the ‘Silicon Savannah’, arguably the origin of Africa’s tech movement.

There is admiration and emulation of Hollywood – Nigeria’s ‘Nollywood’ is now the second-largest film producer in the world; and a desire to replicate the hustle of America’s industrial towns by a rapidly urbanising continent – 50% of our population will live in cities by 2030.

American influence has rewired our centuries-old cultures to embrace individual achievement and success, in the spirit of the American Dream.

Lastly, I’ll note that in July 2020, the African Union (AU) launched the operational phase of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), comprised of 54 countries

and ensuring we form the world’s largest free trade area. AfCFTA leverages our \$3trn collective GDP while liberalising our markets for future intracontinental economic growth.

While your Administration seeks to rekindle the spirit of the American Dream, we are primed to make the African Dream a reality.

Although the outgoing Presidential Administration ignited an agenda of isolationism and depressed global demand, Africa has learned from its previous mistakes and has reset foreign integration opportunity. It’s now your move.

When your private sector is telling you, as Facebook billionaire Mark Zuckerberg recently made clear, that “the future will be built in Africa”; when the continent’s next generation agrees that the 21st century will be the African century; when we have proven that we can

Mr President, Africa’s leaders want to believe that you will reaffirm American support for our continent’s growth.

check the challenges that have stifled the potential of the world’s largest collective marketplace it is clear that Africa is rising, whether the West realises it or not.

Decisions taken in Washington DC have a profound impact on Africa. Know that America has an opportunity that only comes around once in a while to shift policy and change the bearing of our planet, again in your country’s favour.

If you, Mr President, do not take advantage of the opportunity that we Africans are presenting to you, it will pass you by.

Yours Sincerely,
Ivor Ichikowitz

Ivor Ichikowitz is an African industrialist and philanthropist, sponsor of the acclaimed, annually-held African Youth Survey (AYS) and one of New African Magazine’s 100 Most Influential Africans of 2020.