

DEBATE

Amir Ben Yahmed, Chief Executive Officer of Jeune Afrique Media Group, President of Africa CEO Forum

I think there are already some questions in the room. Madam Prime Minister.

Aminata Touré, former Prime Minister of Senegal

Take this impatience as a desire to contribute a different vision. If there's one thing Africa lacks, it's a good public relations and communications policy. As Mr. Severino said earlier, no other place in the world has suffered so many attacks on an ongoing basis. Most of our countries became independent relatively recently, in 1960. In the meantime, life expectancy rose by 20 years in a very short space of time. Infant mortality has been virtually eradicated. This year in Senegal, more girls than boys entered secondary school. The girls came first in their A-levels and went on to medical school. So there is progress.

If I were a 25-year-old listening to you, I'd set sail. There are areas of progress. Nobody is talking about Nigeria, with 220 million people and Africa's largest economy, ahead of Algeria, Egypt and South Africa. That is not a coincidence. Africa has 1.3 billion people and a combined GDP of \$3.4 trillion. So, for businessmen, this is the place to go to do business.

I think we also need to see the other side of Africa, and I completely agree with Lionel when he talks about prospects, with all the difficulties, which are due to the system of governance, which is overwhelmingly male. And yet women grow 70% of the food. There is also innovation in other areas, such as the film industry with Nollywood. There is room for creation and hope, and that's what we need to sell today. This is a different Africa, better educated than its elders, with significant opportunities. Today, there's zero industrialization, but the context is changing, as Lionel said. There is now a middle class of 200 million consumers. Just ask the people working in the telephone industry, who are in fierce competition with each other.

There are problems we are all familiar with and have all identified. Having said that, the relationship between democracy and development is not an easy one, when we see what is happening in Rwanda. So there's a caveat. Today Africa has extraordinary assets but the cards need reshuffling. This is what we discussed at the mining panel. Business cannot go on as usual. You produce locally, and the extraction industries do not pay any taxes. I don't mind Europe saying, "We take care of Europeans," but you have to pay taxes where you make your money. The debate must be over key issues of this kind that must be resolved.

We know all the constraints, including poor governance and corruption. That is one of the reasons for the coups. That is clear. But it takes two to tango. Where do the people who are doing the corrupting come from? Often from northern countries. These issues must be addressed.



As far as young people are concerned, I don't consider them a time bomb, general. I see them as a workforce who need to be taken care of, with the constraints that that brings. There will be a latency period of 4-5 years, which we will have to make the most of to organize them into community cooperatives with the energy that once existed but has been drained by certain banking policies. This needs to be said. The cooperative nature of the rural world is inevitable. You can't take African farmers one by one and ask them to hire a tractor to plow a hectare. It's not possible unless you put them together. We have examples of this just about everywhere. In my opinion, we need to think about this.

You mentioned coups, 10 or 12, but Africa has 54 countries. Let's not forget that. That's why I was saying that we have a very poor public relations policy, which makes us look like the gateway to hell when there are areas blossoming in every field, in the arts and culture. Take Covid, for example. Everyone said we would die. The United Nations Secretary General said there would be millions of deaths in Africa. It's no coincidence that we were the least-affected continent. Some people tried to explain that this was due to antibodies developed because of malaria, but that is not true. It's because measures were taken, such as wearing masks, activity was stopped, with the consequences that we are still paying for today.

So I think we need to look at Africa clearly and be done with the broken record about the land of woe, since there is evidence to the contrary in many countries. We talk a lot about Rwanda, which has emerged from genocide and is the most cited example today. From the viewpoint of democracy this is debateable, but many other countries in East Africa and elsewhere have made progress.

Without sweeping problems under the rug, because they do exist, the middle class is growing. There are too many poor people who must be brought up to standard very quickly. States will have to cut wasteful spending, as some investments have clearly not been the most appropriate. For example, we put money into a very expensive regional express train. Perhaps we should have put it into rail services across the country instead.

That's what I wanted to say, because listening to you, if I were a young person, I'd have nothing to do here and I'd leave as soon as possible, but that's not the reality I see. I see a diaspora of young Senegalese returning to Senegal. I see a diaspora of young Nigerians who have returned to Nigeria, and this is what has made the Nigerian economy dynamic. Obviously they have problems with corruption and security in the north, but generally speaking, the economy is extremely strong. What needs to be looked at with our partners is how to expand areas of opportunity while recognising the problems inherent in a long history that no one else in the world has had to suffer. Thierry, it's great that there's a plenary panel, but next time, 80% of Africans should be represented, i.e. women and young people. They are the continent's movers and shakers.

Amir Ben Yahmed

Lionel, I don't think you'll need to advise the Prime Minister on her campaign.

Sékou Condé, Executive Director of the NGO Frontières d'Afrique

Hello. I'm from Guinea. I'm Executive Director of the NGO Frontières d'Afrique based in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso. I would like to make a quick positive comment paying tribute to,



congratulating and saluting Thierry de Montbrial for creating this space for peaceful exchange. It shows what can be done. In a tense, violent global environment, opinion leaders, both men and women, can come together peacefully.

Where is Africa heading? The question is revealing. For the first time, the West does not know where Africa is going. So we won't be taught to be intelligent. If we don't know something, we just ask. It's already okay, we're starting from scratch together again.

We have been in the theatre of conflicts since 2012, and we are involved in all the conflicts in border areas. Africa's problem today is stability, guaranteed stability. Constitutional breakdowns. I agree when people say the causes of coups are economic or bad governance. But when did they start? What happened with Sylvanus Olympio in 1963 and Patrice Lumumba in 1960? In my view, the fundamental problem is the culture of the army. The African representatives here are a perfect illustration of the level of intelligence and maturity of Africans. This panel is highly representative of Africa. However, during the fight for independence, in the history books, there was the Casablanca group, the Monrovia group and another group called the Madagascar group. We raised the issue of the culture and the role of the army. With 210 coups and constitutional breaks, there is no guarantee of economic development. The issue of powers and regions needs to be addressed.

My question is, what is being done about the army, the political role of armies in Africa and the repeated breaks resulting from the 210 coups from 1953 to the present day?

Amir Ben Yahmed

Francis, I know who this question is for.

Sékou Condé

Second, the time the military is in power and the time civilians are in power is almost the same. And unfortunately, the result is almost the same, although there are differences from country to country.

My second question is about regime change, which requires the army's involvement to avoid repetitive breaks. Africa doesn't have a productivity and efficiency problem; it has a stability problem. Should the regime be changed? With 90% of strong presidential regimes, it doesn't work. Instead of talking about the international community, we should be talking about the African community. Is it possible to look at a regime that includes the army's role as an integral part of the system of governance?

Amir Ben Yahmed

Thanks for the question. Francis will respond and then I'd like to give the floor to Jean-Michel Severino and Mr. Dossou so that the Prime Minister is not left with the impression that we've been negative, which does not seem to me to be the case.

General Francis A. Béhanzin, Co-Founder and Chairman of the *Réseau mondial des professionnels de sécurité et de défense pour la prévention et la lutte contre le*



terrorisme, former Commissioner Political Affairs, Peace and Security of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS)

I would never defend a coup. I am a defender of human rights, even though I am a general. What prompts military officers to stage coups? It is stated everywhere that politicians and civil society drive a country's social and political life. More often than not, it is civilians who ask the military to step in, although the army's role is now defined in almost every African country's constitution. When civilians can't agree, the state must still keep working. The army is the only bulwark against the politicians' notorious intransigence. This must not be forgotten.

Let me give you a very simple example from Mali. President IBK, peace be upon him, was democratically elected. There were problems in parliament with the election of deputies. There was talk of the dispute being settled by the Constitutional Court. ECOWAS was deployed on the ground and sent experts who proposed re-appointing the Constitutional Court and referring the case to it. However, some politicians said that if they sat down at the negotiating table, it would be to discuss the terms of President IBK's resignation. Forty-eight hours later, the military took power. Did the army act on its own, or did civilians drive them to it? It is very clear. In our countries, we have seen the kind of turmoil that prompts the army to take power.

Let me mention Senegal, where the army has not taken power. In Benin, we have had many troubles, a host of coups. We had a military-fascist regime for 17 years—the main organizer of this national conference can bear me out on this—but we made a smooth transition from dictatorship to democracy without bloodshed. Since 1991, after the national conference, Benin's army has kept out of socio-political life. But when public safety is at stake, whatever the military's status, they will always want to take power.

Take the example of the G5 Sahel. Security and development are at the heart of the G5 Sahel. Why didn't it work at this level? The international community has over 20 different strategies in the Sahel region with a total lack of coordination. We need to look reality in the face. This panel will certainly not be able to solve every problem, but it is absolutely essential that we, as an international community, think about public safety in Africa. I said we have leadership, governance and strategic choice problems.

Benin was one of the world's leading oil palm producers. Why is oil palm no longer produced at all today? It is the elite. Thank you.

Amir Ben Yahmed

Thank you, general. A final word from Jean-Michel and Robert.

Jean-Michel Severino, President of Investisseurs & Partenaires

Debates like this never end, so I think it will continue this evening after this session with interested parties. We are being encouraged to leave on an upbeat note. In line with what Lionel said earlier, I personally believe that despite our many economic woes, one very powerful factor will speed up our long-term economic growth, which is the demographic dividend.

Niger is the only African country that has not yet seen a positive change in the ratio of employed to unemployed people. It will probably not appear until after 2030. Across Africa, the proportion of the working population as a part of the total population is increasing, which is a catalyst for growth. Given Africa's demographic structure and the pace of transition, the trigger of growth will work for a very long time.

That in itself is not enough, of course. Economic policies still need to leverage this extraordinary competitive edge, which only Africa will have in the next 70 years. By the end of the century, Africa will account for around half of the world's workforce. The continent will have two billion people by 2050. The only question is whether it will have 3.5 or 4 billion by the end of the century. Growth will not stop there.

I believe one of the most important things that needs to be done to leverage the demographic dividend is public policy, as Prime Minister Touré said, but some things have not worked. While variations exist, an area where Africa is weak, on average, is freeing up energy for entrepreneurship. Africa must build up its productive sector. The small number of existing businesses means that new ones must be supported and created. However, most policies supporting the sector's development in Africa tend to focus on very large companies or infrastructure. Consequently, we are now in a situation where, in most countries, it is very hard for entrepreneurship to move from the small-scale stage to a more structured stage. It hits a glass ceiling in terms of access to finance and capacity, which is just as important. All the companies I work with are grappling with this issue.

But the wall can be crossed. Without taking up too much time, I am struck by Africa's extraordinary appetite for enterprise. This is not because Africans are different from the rest of the world, but because they are in a particular historical and economic situation, which means that entrepreneurship is a normal way out of poverty, a way of blazing one's own trail. No offense to anyone, but many Africans want to get rich without becoming Director General of Customs. If we want profound change for Africa, these Africans need a step up to become prosperous, to become employers, without being forced into corruption, which unfortunately is an all too human temptation in these contexts.

I cannot name all of the 300 companies we are currently supporting, but some of them have had absolutely meteoric rises. We supported the creation of a company called La Laiterie du Berger, Dolima, for consumers of fresh dairy products in Senegal. It has grown from nothing to several tens of millions of euros in sales, a partnership with Danone, hundreds of employees and is building a completely independent dairy industry in Senegal. We support textile companies in Madagascar that have gone from zero to a thousand employees in the space of seven or eight years, survived Covid and sell luxury goods to the world's leading brands. In the Sahel, we support companies, like one that springs to mind, AgroServ, which has gone from trader to corn producer and is completely transforming Burkina Faso's food market despite very difficult odds.

So there are many great success stories out there. They are not only possible, they happen before our very eyes as soon as entrepreneurs are allowed to operate in a normal ecosystem, in other words, when they can hire, acquire technology and have access to capital. If we want to leverage the demographic dividend, I believe it is essential for us to have not just the 300 I&P companies, but three million companies. The shift to the stage of the investor dedicated to



building favorable ecosystems, which is the job of public policy, must be stronger than it has been until now. It would be a logical step in a series of public policy developments that began in the early 20th century, when infrastructure was a very high priority. As Lionel said, this was done at the expense of all the other sectors. Since the 2010s, we have seen a significant acceleration in social policies, education and health. Today, we can and must take a new step forward.

Amir Ben Yahmed

Thank you, Jean-Michel. Robert, you have 90 seconds.

Robert Dossou, President of the African Association of International Law, former Minister of Foreign Affairs of Benin, former President of the Constitutional Court of Benin

I said and I proclaim that Africa is making progress. The proof is that in recent years, if I take the case of Benin, we have seen the emergence of small and medium-sized agro-industrial companies, and their products are on the market.

Everyone is courting Africa. France held France-Africa meetings with Japan, China and the Soviet Union, and when the Russian Federation became angry with France, it vowed to get even with France in Africa. In January, Italy will host a meeting with Africa. That means we are making progress. However, we are not consolidated on any level because we do not have a democratic culture or an institutional mentality.

For entrepreneurs to thrive and be sure they will get a return on their investment, they need a framework that the State must create. When the State does not create it, we must say so. I will stop here.

So we are moving forward and will continue to do so. Thank you.

Amir Ben Yahmed

Thank you all for this debate.