

Opinion – Racial Injustice and the Erosion of America’s Global Standing

Written by Abdou Rahim Lema

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ABDOU RAHIM LEMA, JUN 28 2020

A specter is haunting America, one of centuries-old pathologies never structurally addressed. When the 2020 black lives matter protests began, following the police killing of an unarmed man, George Floyd, in Minneapolis, it should have been a domestic crisis. Instead, the outrage following Floyd’s death, compounded by the scandal-prone leadership of the Trump administration, has quickly turned what was originally an “American tragedy” into an international one with major geopolitical ramifications for years to come. The demonstrations across the world in solidarity with American protestors is just one example of its international dimension. But a more defining factor in the internationalization of this particular saga was surely the violent response by law enforcement officers and the constant attempts to militarize the crisis.

For many, especially those watching from countries and regions that have long been lectured on human rights issues, the whole episode was another indication of a deep-rooted hegemonic hypocrisy – “do as I say, not as I do.” Unsurprisingly, America’s geopolitical adversaries, in a characteristically opportunistic burst, have been quick to jump on the social justice bandwagon to score a few geopolitical points.

Iran branded George Floyd’s death a ‘cold-blooded’ killing that reveals the true nature of the American government. Russia opted for what it usually does: flooding the Internet with divisive messages and seizing the occasion to critique Washington’s ‘repressive’ response to the unrest. Turning the geopolitical dynamics on its head, the Russian Foreign Ministry called on American authorities to respect people’s right to peacefully protest.

China was also quick to jump in despite being reprimanded for its growing totalitarian repression aided by state-of-the-art surveillance technology, epitomized by the suppression of the pro-democracy movement in Hong Kong and mass detentions of its Muslim minority in Xinjiang. But, if in April America was able to issue harsh and scathing criticisms against China while Beijing faced a global outcry over the racial profiling and mistreatment of African nationals during the COVID-19 crisis, the table seems to have turned. Hua Chunying, a spokesperson for China’s Foreign Affairs Ministry, posted ‘I can’t breathe’ on Twitter, referring to George Floyd’s last words that have become a rallying slogan for demonstrators the world over, while China’s state-media have been actively calling on America to address racial injustice at home and stop interfering in other countries’ internal affairs.

But the battle between Beijing and Washington extended to Africa, where the two powers have been attempting to undermine each other’s broader engagements with and interests in the continent. Nonetheless, it is crucial not to overstate China’s role in Africa’s perception of race and racism issues in America – issues one could refer to as ‘the Great American Question’– if only because the dynamics and the relationship well-outdate China’s modern engagement with the continent.

From a historical vantage point, to talk about America is to talk about African slavery. And understanding that tragic history is critical to understanding the reactions in Africa to the Great American Question. In July 1964, Malcolm X brought home to his ‘African brothers and sisters’ at the first summit of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) – the predecessor of the African Union (AU) – in Cairo, Egypt, his concerns on the fate of Americans of African descent. Malcolm X’s message was a poignant pan-African plea: African-Americans, he said, ‘firmly believe that African

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problems are our problems and that our problems are African problems....’ In part, thanks to Malcolm X’s moving imploration, the OAU passed a resolution that condemned ‘the existence of discriminatory practices’ against African-Americans and called on America ‘to intensify... efforts to ensure the total elimination of all forms of discrimination based on race, color or ethnic origin.’

This was just one instance of how America’s foreign policy towards the continent was complicated by racism at home, a fact John F. Kennedy’s Secretary of State, Dean Rusk, once admitted: ‘the conduct of our foreign policy is handicapped by our record in the field of civil rights and racial discrimination.’

Decades later, that egregious record still shocks and disheartens many in Africa. So, it was only natural that Floyd’s killing drew widespread condemnations in the continent. For instance, the president of the AU Commission, Moussa Faki Mahamat, firmly condemned the murder of George Floyd. In his statement, he recalled the OAU’s historic resolution of 1964 to reaffirm ‘the rejection by the [AU] of persistent discriminatory practices against black citizens of the United States of America.’ Likewise, in an open letter, African writers, ‘who are connected beyond geography,’ denounced the killing and expressed their strongest solidarity with the protestors. Such an outpouring of outcries across the continent forced American embassies in Africa to attempt to control the damage by making an unprecedented move to condemn the murder that took place back home.

But given America’s long history of racism, enforced and sustained through violence and socio-economic oppression, such diplomatic efforts are destined to achieve very little. At the Democratic Convention in 2004, Barack Obama, an ambitious young African-American senator who would later become America’s first black president, told an electrified, charmed audience that central in the American political culture is the conviction that ‘all men are created equal.’ This, the young senator insisted, made America the only place on earth ‘where my story is even possible.’ The paradox, however, is that beneath that American exceptionalism also lies the foundation of the Great American Question. And Obama himself surely knows – at least he should – too well how America has long denied its black people the inalienable rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness – the basis of the so-called American dream.

Yet that same America has failed to liberate its black people from perpetual oppression and subjugation at home. As a product of that brutal reality, Malcolm X warned his audience at the 1964 Cairo summit on how, to people of color, America could be compared to South Africa’s Apartheid regime. Indeed, while the Apartheid regime ‘is like a vicious wolf, openly hostile to black humanity..., America is cunning like a fox, friendly and smiling on the surface, but even more vicious and deadly than the wolf.’

In that 1964 African tour, Malcolm X also observed, this time in Ghana, that there is no American dream for America’s black citizens. There is only the American nightmare. Today, that nightmare seems to engulf the country and help further tarnish its global standing. The protest and the quickness with which it gained steam might be a clear sign of a troubled nation: Think of the racial injustice, the police brutality, the job losses, and the Covid-19 pandemic, which, instead of being America’s *great equalizer* it was deemed to be, turned out to be a black plague for Black America.

Unfortunately, clear leadership to steer the nation out of these storms has been wanting. ‘When the looting starts, the shooting starts’ is usually something one associates with some nameless militaristic state on the brink of collapse. But this particular fanning of the flame of hatred came from Donald Trump himself. Little wonder, some see America becoming a fragile state whose stabilization is off the table in the near term, while others see a much gloomier picture.

...These THUGS are dishonoring the memory of George Floyd, and I won’t let that happen. Just spoke to Governor Tim Walz and told him that the Military is with him all the way. Any difficulty and we will assume control but, when the looting starts, the shooting starts. Thank you!

— Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump) May 29, 2020

America’s democracy was built on the denial of basic humanity to a large portion of its population, while its wealth

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and power are rooted in the plunder of its black and native inhabitants. And that could well be its undoing today. It is the specter that has been haunting America. But all is not yet lost. If anything, the sustained protests over the past weeks offer a window of opportunity to genuinely atone for these historical wrongs and, perhaps, avoid James Baldwin’s apocalyptic call for “fire next time”.

There is a consensus that racial injustice at home has eroded America’s international standing. That the country has so far failed to reconcile the values and ideals it professes to champion with what is actually happening. In 1964, Malcolm X called on heads of independent African states to rescue their ‘long-lost brothers and sisters’ by bringing ‘our problem to the United Nations [Council] on Human Rights.’ Today, Philonise Floyd, George Floyd’s brother, is imploring the same institution to help. This presents a clear opportunity for America’s critics to call out its hypocrisy. Surely, Russia, Iran and China are among the last places to look to for human rights protection. But the Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman was right: ‘it’s time for the U.S. to drop the mentor’s tone and look in the mirror.’ Only then might it regain lost ground, both at home and abroad.

About the author:

Abdou Rahim Lema is a Yenching Scholar of Peking University, where he completed a Master’s Degree in China Studies, focusing on Politics and International Relations. His research work focuses on South-South Cooperation, Triangular Cooperation, and the growing Sino-African security and development relations.