

# Interview

**JOHN STANFIELD** PROFESSOR, FORMER SSR CHAIR OF AFRICAN STUDIES AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MAURITIUS

## “I think that deep in the corridors of the US State Department there is the belief that French Africa is a lost cause”

L'express talks to Professor John Stanfield, former Professor at Yale University, and former SSR Chair of African Studies at the University of Mauritius and Director of the Pan-African think tank ASARFI about the changing geopolitical picture in Africa. And why France seems to be losing out.



■ We have seen a number of coups, Niger, Mali, Chad, Gabon and so on. With the possible exception of Gabon, one consistent theme has been anti-France sentiment. Why is that taking place?

Because France happens to be what I call a propped-up colonial power. It was invaded by Germany in World War 2 and afterwards the US, UK and the newly-formed UN that gave France back its colonies. France has one of the weakest economies in Europe which makes it very dependent on its ex-colonies, while the UK pulled out of its colonies in the 1960s, France never left economically, 30-35% of the French economy being dependent on its ex-colonies, so they are in a very rough place. Now you have a generational shift and a changing geopolitics in Africa and Asia and this is one of the implications of that. You have had, what eight coups since 2020. This is going to be become

more complex because they are not textbook coup leaders. We have a hard time understanding this because we are talking about movements that go outside the paradigmatic understanding of coup governments. This started with the Arab Spring where social media was used, the domino effect, people are learning protest and regime change. So it's a generational change, its anti-colonial sentiment and what is striking about this is that many of these coups are 'pro democratic'. They are tired of autocracy and poor governance and foreigners having a hand in governance. Meanwhile, Macron - the French President is stuck between a rock and a hard place, he may be liberal and progressive but in office he has inherited a traditional establishment. So all this has taken him by surprise and he has a lot of right-wing to placate. He cannot just do the Harold Wilson 'winds of change' thing. Wilson also had a right wing to deal

with, but they too were convinced of the need for change. But in France, the government's back is against the wall. ■ There is also a security context in which this is taking place; since 2014 France has deployed more than 5000 troops into five countries across the Sahel region to combat armed groups in the region. This has been the biggest deployment into Africa since the Algerian war. Fast forward to 2022, Mali that first asked the French to come in, asked them to leave and many states turned to Russia and the Wagner Group. During that period, violence in the region has only got worse with 43% of all deaths linked to terrorism taking place there. To what extent has that military failure played a part in all this?

You've hit the nail on the head. What historically speak-

ing has basically kept France in Africa is its military. Now Africans have a choice, they can go the paramilitary route like Wagner, they can turn to China. The world is not straitjacketed anymore, you cannot just send in the troops. The one thing that France cannot afford is a war. And they just walked into a mess on that one. ■ One thing you mentioned is that this is a generational change. One thing that stands out is the relative youth of many of the leaders of these new governments. Such as in Burkina Faso to take one example. But how new is this really? We have had coups in the past led by young, junior army officers and even those talking about democracy, such as Jerry Rawlings in Ghana and today's coup leaders hark back to Thomas Sankara in Burkina Faso. It's very new. What we

are talking about is one of the symptoms of what a post-Cold War Africa looks like, understanding they have choices and are looking to negotiate with different powers. This is very different from the older generation of leaders. This is not just limited to the new coup governments but can be seen even in South Africa which has been very assertive in pushing back against the West.

■ Let's talk specifically about the Macron administration's strategy. He came in in 2017 saying that he wanted a new relationship with the continent. One can remember similar statements from Francois Mitterrand in 1990 and Nicolas Sarkozy in 2008. Let's start with economics, one thing that characterized the French sphere in Africa was the CFA Franc used in 14 states and were obliged to put half their foreign reserves in France, all this was criticized for not allowing these countries to manage their own currencies and economies. In 2019 France announced the setting up of a new common currency for the region but still pegged to the Euro and still with an exchange rate set by France.

■ So you think the changes did not go far enough, would that be a fair criticism? Oh yeah it would. Keep in mind that Macron came in as a progressive, but still adhered to the old way of doing things. It looks different, but more of the same. That's the problem that drove a lot of anger.

■ But surely it didn't stay the same. Macron came in wanting to change the relationship by moving it from the economic relationship channelled through friendly African leaders. He came in with a 'neoliberal' view where he wanted the French private sector would lead economic engagement with Africa. Aside from a few small-scale investments and start-ups, nothing much resulted from that. And that at a time when other non-European powers were willing to pour billions into infrastructure. Was that a miscalculation in Paris?

Oh yes it was. They were a bit myopic about the way that the world has changed. Africa now has choices.

■ Another issue was that Macron wanted to engage with civil society in Africa. You had this France-Africa summit in Montpellier in 2021 where only civil society came. At the same time, France raised tuition rates for foreign students in French university where about 50% of students come

from Africa and cracking down on migration. It seems to be a mixed message doesn't it?

What you are saying is very comparable to what is happening in the UK. You know the whole issue is I think what they wanted to do is look for more ways to engage with civil society in their former colonies. That backed off because civil society in many of these countries have actually backed these coups. And one of the reasons why the ECOWAS headed by Nigeria's President backed off from military intervention in Niger was that it was opposed by civil society in his own country.

■ So they misunderstood civil society in Africa? Yes, many of these regimes were overthrown with the support of civil society. Look at the ousting of Robert Mugabe in Zimbabwe with tanks. Civil society came out and celebrated with the military. The thing is that they did their own miscalculation about dealing with African civil society. And then there is the problem of the gulf with the civil society in France itself which is going more right-wing in terms of opposing African immigration or doing things like provocative caricatures.

■ So you mean that Paris did not realize that the civil society they were dealing with in francophone Africa did not look too kindly on France themselves? There you go! That is part of that. And many of the civil society groups they did deal with were not really representative of the views on the ground.

■ Wasn't there also the problem of mixed messaging, on the one hand in 2018 a report commissioned by the French government identified 66,000 cultural artefacts taken from Africa to return them. And Macron came out in public calling colonialism a "crime against humanity" while at the same time proposals started coming up to start teaching the "positive aspects" of colonialism in French schools. Is this about right wing pressures within France undercutting what the French coalition in Paris?

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continent that understand that. And many states are understanding that it's not like the old days anymore, where you just show up and bribe your way through. There are some very sophisticated leaders in Africa now that are thinking strategically. Even out of these coups, what we see is that its leaders are getting organized amongst themselves. There are a lot of European states wanting to remain relevant and are looking at ways of collaborating with African states. But there are others that don't do that and disconnected themselves all together. Africa is very different today, it's the youngest continent and are getting their act together. Even many Asian powers have understood the need for collaboration, many of these Asian leaders have personal relationships or went to school with many of the new African leaders and now do

business together. ■ In Mauritius, since the 1970s we have been quite uneasy about coups on the continent. While you have explained the social contexts of the recent coups in Africa and French policy there, here in the Indian Ocean France might have territorial disputes with different states - with the Comoros over Mayotte or with Mauritius over Tromelin - but it's a resident power because of Reunion Island. What spillover of Paris' troubles on the continent can we expect to see in our region?

When I talked about European powers wanting to stay relevant, that's the story of France in the Indian Ocean. This is not just about economics or politics, but also about



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