

Africa's Purchase of the French Presidency

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Contents

Introduction	3
Post-Colonial France, the “Suitcase Republic”	3
The Suitcase System Expands	5

Introduction

We have seen several curious reversals of the usual pecking order in world affairs regarding Africa's status of late, not least of which have been the spectacle of Portugal begging for aid from its former colony Angola, and of European citizens relocating back to their former colonies, fleeing economic crisis in Europe for poorly-paid jobs in the African hinterland¹.

But there is a longer-lived and more secret relationship between Africa and Europe that overturns the conventional view of African presidents being corrupted by European aid-with-strings-attached; this is the phenomenon of *la valise*, "the suitcase" system of millions of francs sent over decades by African dictators to corrupt the European political process.

The first round of French presidential elections will take place on 22 April. Socialist candidate François Hollande is expected to have the edge on incumbent Gaullist President Nicolas Sarkozy, but will likely not earn a majority, which would then set the scene for a run-off in May. Seeing as how language differences divide common understanding between Francophone Africa and Anglophone Africa, the two largest colonial-language blocs, it is worth us here in the English-speaking part of the continent to examine this phenomenon so entrenched in Francophone African affairs – and now apparently spreading. The Center for French and Francophone Studies at Duke University in North Carolina hosted a debate on *la valise* on 5 October 2011 called "The Colonies Pay Back: Culture and Corruption in Franco-African Relations," and this article comprises extracts from that debate.

Post-Colonial France, the "Suitcase Republic"

Philippe Bernard, the outgoing *Le Monde* correspondent for Africa, initiated the debate by noting that Robert Bourgi², Sarkozy's unofficial advisor, had in September 2011 accused former socialist President Jacques Chirac and his Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin, who were in power from 1995–2007, of having received enormous bribes in the form of suitcases stuffed with cash, from five West and Central African states – the Congo, Burkina Faso, Senegal, Ivory Coast, and Gabon – to fund Chirac's campaign. In a later interview with Canal+, Bourgi claimed that the 1988 campaign of far-right candidate Jean-Marie le Pen of the National Front, had also been partly funded by the *valise*. Chirac and de Villepin have denied Bourgi's claims.

According to the *Telegraph's* retelling of the tale³, Bourgi claimed in an interview with *Le Journal du Dimanche* that he had personally "transported 'tens of millions of francs' each year, with the amounts going up in the run-up to French presidential elections – an intimation the cash was used to fund Mr Chirac's political campaigns. 'I saw Chirac and Villepin count the money in front of me,' he said. He alleged he regularly passed on bank notes from five African presidents: Abdoulaye Wade of Senegal [in power 2000–2012]; Blaise Compaoré of Burkina Faso [1987-today]; Laurent Gbagbo of Ivory Coast [2000–2011]; Denis Sassou Nguesso of the Congo [1997-today] and Omar Bongo of Gabon [1967–2009], whom Mr Bourgi called 'Papa'. Together,

¹ An example these tales of return is at www.nytimes.com/2010/07/14/business/global/14angolabiz.html

² Born in Dakar, Senegal, in 1945 to a French Lebanese family, Bourgi was admitted at the Paris Bar as a lawyer. A former adviser to Chirac and de Villepin, Sarkozy awarded him the *Legion d'honneur* in 2007.

³ www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/france/8756097/Jacques-Chirac-regularly-received-cash-from-African-leaders.html

he alleged they contributed £6.2-million to Mr Chirac's successful 2002 presidential campaign. A sixth leader, President Obiang N'Guema of Equatorial Guinea [1979-today] allegedly was the last member to join the cash donor club," until, Bourgi claimed, a nervous de Villepin brought the system to a halt in 2005. Bourgi claimed he had personally run the valise system for 25 years and in exchange, the African dictators were granted huge reductions in their debt to France once their sponsored candidate attained office in the Elysée.

Bernard said he believed the system had arisen out of the notion of "France-Afrique, the confusion of French and African interests. It has been a public secret since [African] liberation in the 1960s: in 1960/61, deals were signed that France will use its power to defend the [African] regimes and France will have exclusive access to African raw materials and the right of France to intervene militarily in case of threats to African national security. In the 1980s, the Gaullists [then in opposition against François Mitterand's Socialist government] were similarly accused – that a percentage of Gabonese oil revenues were allegedly used to finance their campaigns – but proof and public testimony was lacking."

Professor Stephen Smith, former Africa editor of *Libération*, and Bernard's predecessor at *Le Monde*, recalled rumours that "money smuggled in by Africans to the French Prime Minister's office in djembe drums. The office has no air-conditioning, so the thought of him standing there with his sleeves rolled up counting it all is amusing." On a serious note, however, Smith recalled that in 1971, at the very start of a reign that only ended in 1993, it was said that the first President of Ivory Coast, Félix Houphouët-Boigny, had donated "bags of money" to the conservative Georges Pompidou government. There was, Smith said, "a long continuity of the practice from the Gaullists [Charles de Gaulle was in power 1959–1969] to [the rightist Republican Valéry] Giscard d'Estaing [1974–1981], a continuity of conservative governments," who had been propped up by la valise: "This amounts to a post-colonial 'informal state,' not on paper, but in practice."

Remember that this period – the Fifth French Republic – was brought into being in 1958 by the crisis in France precipitated by the Algerian Liberation War. So we have half a century of African dictators, installed and propped up by French military power, who in turn propped up with African oil and other revenue, a string of conservative sister regimes in France – although Smith said that the valise system in the six countries also worked via French companies working in parallel in the former colonies: one paid the French conservative Gaullists; the other paid the French socialists and communists. Given France's strategic position within Europe, its influence only matched by Germany and Britain, anyone able to buy the French Presidency in effect purchases huge influence in Europe itself – so progressive politics on both continents appear to have been bedeviled by these secret transactions.

Smith said that his first newspaper scoop on the secret practice regarding the shadowy character of Bourgi, was in 1995 for *Libération* when he wrote about the unprocedural write-off of Zaïrean dictator Mobutu Sese Seko's debts: Mobutu "raised his little staff and I was afraid he would hit me! Robert Bourgi earned €600,000 from Mobutu to put out the fire – and he earned €1-million to stop a book that I was writing."

Bourgi's "accounting is pristine; he deals only in cash, so there is little to prove." The bribe money was later deposited in South African or Lebanese bank accounts, Smith claimed. The reach of Bourgi's unofficial power was considerable: Smith claimed that when Sarkozy wanted a rare photo-opportunity with South Africa's now-reclusive and elderly Nelson Mandela, Bourgi simply phoned up "Papa," Gabonese President Omar Bongo, who persuaded the old man to

agree to fly to Paris for the meeting in 2007.

The Suitcase System Expands

Prof Achille Membe, a specialist in post-colonial Africa, responded that the valise system was one of “mutual corruption” that has “shackled France and Africa for decades”: “The relationship is not only corrupt in terms of money... It’s a deeper form of cultural corruption that has emasculated somewhat African civil societies. In terms of the future, France still has military bases in Africa and can kick out a Gbagbo. But when France has to pay a heavy price [for intervention], it will think twice.”

Bernard said that as France’s grip on the African continent started to be eclipsed militarily by the USA in particular⁴, in terms of the Francophone African CFA currency which is linked to the embattled Euro, in terms of French companies losing their exclusive relationships with African regimes as the International Monetary Fund took the reins in many countries and as Chinese, Brazilian and Indian investment poured into the continent, Sarkozy wanted the “network of go-betweens” such as Bourgi, who had “operated as a parallel diplomat,” to end.

Smith agreed that France now made more money from its relations with Anglophone Africa – South Africa and Kenya in particular – than it did from its former colonies, but warned that “now you’ve got a multiplication of the French exceptionalist models: China’s Africa relationship is as corrupt as the French; the French preserve and privilege has now become globalised.” Membe added that in his view, the waning of the French star in Africa – despite French remaining a dominant African language, and despite the existence of an African Diaspora literati in France – was that France itself “has entered a process of re-provincialising,” of monocultural conservatism and retreat from world affairs.

Membe said that “Robert Bourgi’s ‘revelations’ weren’t revelations in Africa. In Francophone Africa, this hasn’t been perceived as a scandal” because the prevailing cynicism about Franco-African relations was underscored by a long-term trend of the decline of the importance of France to its former colonies: “Geography is no longer centred on Paris... Robert Bourgi and others are the last spasms of a dead proposition, something that is on its knees, no longer historical but anecdotal... France will become a parenthesis.”

But it is very far from clear whether the valise system has indeed come to an end and lost its ability to shape African history. Smith said that Sarkozy’s own reputation was in doubt as he had written off 40% of the debts of Congo and of Gabon – whereas Chirac had capped the write-offs at only 8%, so suspected payments to Sarkozy would have been “a good investment by African leaders.” If Sarkozy is also involved, then Bourgi’s end-game in speaking out about the valise system after 25 years – and claiming it ended with Chirac – is clearly not aimed at tarnishing Chirac, who is a dying man and a spent political force, but rather to threaten Sarkozy while he is still President, forcing him to allow Bourgi to retire smoothly, without fear of prosecution, aged 67, to his newly-purchased mansion in Corsica.

⁴ In the 1960s, there were 20,000 French soldiers stationed in Africa, now there are less than 5,000 – although their technical capacity today is far greater. However, in Mali, which has just experienced a coup d’etat, there is a significant American military presence, whereas the French have indicated they will not intervene as was their practice in the past; Sarkozy had reopened the mothballed French military base in Ivory Coast, but France’s 2011 intervention in Ivory Coast only occurred under United Nations mandate.

Smith said the roots of the system lay in the fact that “when Europeans came to Africa, they ‘unbuttoned’ themselves,” initiating the corrupt relationship. But it takes two to tango, so what of the agency of African leaders themselves? “If I was an African leader today,” Smith admitted, “I’d still ‘invest’ in France because the United Nations, IMF etc will turn to France when they need assistance in Africa – despite it having lost leverage as a one-stop centre – so African leaders’ choices will still count.”

It is clear the suitcase system will continue, although likely spreading to include several newly invested powers – the USA, China, Brazil, India and South Africa – and ironically, with continental growth at 5.5%, peripheral Africa’s ability to influence and corrupt political affairs in the metropole may well even increase.

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