

Two weeks' notice: The Geopolitics of Pope Benedict XVI's resignation and the need for an African Successor

✘ The Vatican's official explanation for Pope Benedict XVI's resignation (effective on February 28) attributes the unusual step to the pontiff's advancing age and poor health. In fact, the reasons are far more complex. Pope Benedict (Joseph Ratzinger) faced monumental tasks ranging from upholding the traditional values and relevance of the Church in an ever more secular world to the scandal stemming from allegation of sexual abuse in the United States and a tabloid worthy scandal within the Vatican itself with butlers leaking documents and hints of financial wrongdoing. The age of the Pope, in other words, has little to do with it. With very few exceptions – seven out of some 220 popes since Saint Peter – all of the Popes died in offices. The last one to resign was Celestine V, an especially ineffective pope who was asked to resign after only six months since being appointed (and no Pope ever took the name Celestine again...will the name Benedict meet the same fate?). Certainly the burden of age will have had its share in this exceptional decision but the reasons and implications are far wider than the man and the Church itself.

Benedict XVI has had a difficult reign, marked by bitter infighting, and he will no doubt play a role in determining the future Pope. Benedict represented a renunciation of the more progressive outlook of Vatican II fueling theological arguments and rivalries that will doubtless be repeated in the next Conclave. Certainly, theological orientation will influence the Cardinals' vote but the Church, since the election of Pope John Paul II, the Cardinal of Krakow, Poland, Karol Wojtyła, has been a keen observer and influencer of

global affairs. In 1979, the Polish Pope helped to inspire a rejection of communism in the Catholic majority Soviet Bloc countries that eventually reached Moscow, which literally changed the world in a single decade.

The world has changed in the eight years since Benedict XVI has been Pope, but unlike in the 1990's, the Catholic Church has lost, rather than gained, authority. Benedict's abdication will inevitably also be reflected in significant geopolitical calculations. Pope Ratzinger had difficulties in promoting his strategic international vision. He has been a strong advocate for reconciliation with the Orthodox Patriarch of Moscow while the United States has re-engaged in a kind of Cold War with Russia. To quote President Obama, arguing about Washington's Russian policy during a debate with candidate Romney: "the 80's called and they want their foreign policy back". At the same time, the current Pope was very weary of the US administration's apparent support for political Islam in the countries of the 'Arab Spring'.

Whereas the existential battle between East and West for much of the 20th century was between Communism and Capitalism; the new century and the new millennium has shifted that dialectic, in very simplistic terms, to Christianity vs. Islam, bringing to life the conflict envisaged by Samuel Huntington in his highly influential "The Clash of Civilizations". Seen in crude terms, the world has been engaged in a more convoluted chapter of the Crusades of Medieval times, pitting the West vs. Islam. However, Africa is the continent where this battle is taking shape in the most dramatic way because of the confessional Islamic-Christian tensions and because Africa is slated to be one of the fastest growing economies in the world. Pope Ratzinger stressed the traditional Catholic line in Africa and lacked the appeal of his predecessor. An African pope is needed to bridge that gap and to help turn the cultural tide more in favor of the cultural 'West'.

It is time for an African Pope. The reasons are many, and range from the social to the strategic. An African pope – from the perspective of the Church – would help increase the presence of Catholics in the Continent challenging the advance of Islam, and especially its more radical manifestations, in Africa; in fact, a “black pope” could actually bring to the fore an issue forgotten for many years, restoring a balance that seems to have faded. The conflict in Mali, whereby a largely Christian south enthusiastically supported the military intervention of the former colonial power of France against an Islamist uprising in the North serves as the microcosm of the wider ideological divide in Africa that an African pope can help to bridge.

Peter Appiah Turkson, The Cardinal from Accra, Ghana, is considered among the possible favorites to emerge from the conclave to elect the successor to Benedict XVI. There is also a Cardinal from South Africa presented as one of the favorites; however, in geopolitical terms, Turkson is better suited, given that he hails from West Africa, where the West vs. Islam conflict has been most intense. In the sub-Saharan great plateau, the Sahel, from Nigeria to Sudan an apparent religious war between Islam and Christianity has been brewing. In the early 20th century, just one third of Africans were Muslim. Historically, the general religious framework in sub-Saharan Africa was largely a tolerant one. Now over 50% of Africans are Muslim and the expansion of Islam in Africa is proceeding. Islamists dream of a ‘caliphate’ from North Africa to Cape Town.

This is a new scenario; it contrasts sharply with the more recent manifestations of Islam. In Nigeria, for example, the radical Boko Haram has altered inter-religious discourse entirely, to the point that far less than syncretism; even interfaith dialogue has been discouraged. Boko Haram has threatened Christians in villages of the Muslim majority North, with death if they refused to leave. One of the main

reasons for the intolerance toward Christians and the spread of radical Islam in parts of Nigeria and Black Africa is that Christianity is associated with the colonial West. The group is challenging 'Western' culture and influence itself. The violence is therefore aimed at changing the demographic landscape, a phenomenon that has been occurring for decades, but which a series of current circumstances have intensified in the past few years.

The United States, has already been taking steps to face the new challenge, deploying Special Forces in surveillance programs aimed at identifying radical Islamists in Black Africa in a program known as 'Creek Sand'', using drones, special 'contractors, and US Special Forces to counterstrike the Islamist expansion in Africa – according to Craig Whitlock of the Washington Post – identifying terrorists, training local security forces, arming them to lead operations aimed at eliminating terrorist cells belonging to Al-Qaida's African subsidiaries. In Africa, moreover, radical Islamists have also been enabled in their quest by joining forces or sharing resources with local warlords and traffickers (drugs and more), who for many years have been sweeping the African continent.

The US is convinced that Boko Haram is tied to al Qaeda." The militants of al-Shabab, the core of AQIM (Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb) and Boko Haram in Nigeria work closely synchronizing their efforts towards a common goal: the establishment of Shari'a law and the expulsion of Christians. The U.S. Defense Department, working with the Nigerian government's security forces, have noted that Boko Haram has used the same explosive as Al Qaeda operatives in the Sahel, as Islamist groups have invaded and taken over parts of Mali and forming the 'Transitional Council of the Islamic State of Azawad. They demand "Islam as the only religion and Shari'a as the source of law."

Aid from Islamic powers outside Africa has also contributed to

this expansion. Iran is one of the most illustrative examples of this phenomenon. The Supreme Leader, Hojat ol-Eslam Khamanei, launched a veritable strategy to secure greater influence in Black Africa in 2010. The plan was simply known as the "Africa Plan" launched by Khamanei, and is intended to expand Iranian influence in the continent by supporting governments or Islamic groups. The Iranian plan also aims to secure strategic mineral resources such as uranium and so it targets countries rich in that resource.

Iran's dealings with Niger over uranium were very significant, and managed to make some inroads with a country that until a few decades ago, France, one of the world's foremost producers of nuclear energy, as its former colonial power, maintained virtually total control over uranium resources in Niger. Nevertheless, in 2009, Iran was actively seeking Niger's President Tandja's cooperation by offering to assist in the improvement of Niger's infrastructure and agriculture – in addition to cheap oil – to secure access to raw uranium. Iran has also steadily intensified trade relations with Mauritania as well as Niger. Africa represents an important diplomatic frontier for Tehran in its effort to 'seduce' new allies. It does so through generous infrastructure development projects – especially in Sudan and parts of West Africa. Iran's 'return on investment' is realized when African (and other allies) support Iran's nuclear research program, stalling sanctions in international forums; no doubt, Iran can use allies in Africa to help thwart western interests.

Pope Benedict's resignation is a unique historical event for the Church; it offers an opportunity for a radical change and a shift of the socio-cultural tide. The Church has been going through scandals for years and experienced ever more intense internal power struggles. The timing for an African Pope is most propitious. There are many African Catholics but the Pope must be even more universal and it needs reform – urgently. The Pope's resignation is an act of responsibility and courage

that should be emulated by many politicians and CEO's, but his successor will face a truly monumental task from the moral and religious aspects to the geopolitical concerns. The change must be radical or the next Pope will be remembered in history as one of the last.