

# The Mashariki Commentary

## The 2024 US Elections: Implications For Kenya



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On 5<sup>th</sup> November, 2024, Americans will go to the polls to elect a new president and members of Congress. The outcome of the elections, especially at the presidential level is expected to have significant implications for relations between the US and other countries, including Kenya. Changes at the White House and the two chambers of Congress are sure to alter, to significant extent, US foreign policy in general, and towards specific countries. It always matters, for instance, who becomes the president and which of the two dominant parties, Republican or Democratic, controls each of the two congressional chambers and the White House. The forthcoming elections are even more important because the incumbent, Joe Biden is not seeking re-election. Hence even if Democrats take control of the White House, the occupant will be a different person all together, that is, of course, Kamala Harris, the Democratic candidate. Likewise,

should the Republican candidate, Donald Trump, win, there is certainly going to be change in the conduct and orientation of foreign policy. This is because each president and party may have a different world view and ideology of world politics. The outcome of the presidential elections is especially important because of the relative autonomy and discretion the US president enjoys in matters foreign policy, institutional checks and balances notwithstanding. The objective of this commentary is two-fold: to analyse the significance of the US elections for Kenya, and (b) to consider the implications for Kenya of the victory of either of the two candidates.



Why should Kenyans be anxious about the outcome of the polls? There are several reasons why Kenya's leadership and foreign policy establishment, in particular, should show interest in the US elections. First, notwithstanding the debate as to the current state of polarity in the international system, it would be hard to dispute the fact that the US remains the only country in the world with the combination of diplomatic, economic, military and cultural resources necessary to influence events anywhere, if not most of the regions in the world. As a super power, the US possesses immense leverage over other countries, especially the less powerful like Kenya that may be critical to its economic and security interests. It can both punish and reward such countries depending on circumstances. Kenya, like its counterparts in the third world should, therefore, be concerned about who occupies the White House.

Second, owing to Kenya's geopolitical significance and its steady pro-western stance since the Cold War era, the US has over the years forged strategic relations and partnerships with it since Kenya became independent in 1963. In

2018, the cumulative and sustained bilateral engagements culminated in a “Formal Strategic Partnership” anchored on five pillars, namely, Economic Prosperity, Trade, and Investment; Defense Cooperation; Democracy and Governance and Civilian Security; Multilateral and Regional Issues; and Public Health Cooperation. Indeed, the two countries in May 2024, commemorated 60 years of mutual strategic, economic and diplomatic relations.



Kenya remains one of few Sub-Saharan countries that have enjoyed military and security assistance from the US, especially since the early 1980s when the two countries signed a military agreement which effectively ingrained Kenya as a key beneficiary of the US Military Assistance Program (MAP) which includes supply of equipment and training assistance. US has also partnered with Kenyan security sector in counter-terrorism and efforts to eliminate drug trafficking, money laundering and corruption. Of immediate interest are the several aid and assistance packages promised to Kenya by President Biden in May this year. Could Trump who believes in “America First” with his foreign policy retreat from Africa cancel all these should he return to the White House? Trump could also terminate US support for the Kenyan contingent in Haiti. More at stake is the military aid Kenya expects after being offered the Major Non-NATO Member Ally (MNNMA) status by Washington during President’s Ruto’s state visit in May, 2024. The status would open doors for military assistance in the form of equipment, training, and more importantly, the establishment of military hardware stores. It would be safe to expect Harris, who has committed to continue Biden’s foreign policy in broader terms, not to repudiate the MNNMA

status granted to Kenya. On the other hand, Trump's foreign policy pronouncements on the campaign platform continue to de-emphasize military assistance and engagements abroad. Indeed, he clawed back funding for NATO and warned individual members not to expect assistance from the US during his last presidency. He even threatened to move out of NATO. This should raise concerns in Kenya about the viability and sustainability of the MNNA package. Similarly, the fate of the US-sponsored Kenyan mission to Haiti could hang in the balance should Trump return to the White House.



Additionally, Kenya is currently facing an economic crisis fueled mainly by runaway debt. The government has turned to the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for loans. So far, and like before, Kenya has been successful in its requests for aid. The IMF, in particular, has extended the country generous budget support since 2022. It is obvious that the good rapport President Ruto has cultivated with the Biden administration since 2022 when he (Ruto) became president has been critical in the generosity extended to Kenya by the two lenders. As a major shareholder in the two institutions, US patronage and endorsement is crucial for loan applicants. Continued support for Kenya by the IMF and the World Bank could as well depend on the post-election administration in Washington. The next president could decide either to withdraw the diplomatic patronage the US has been extending to Kenya at the two Bretton Woods institutions. Kenya's credit ratings have recently plummeted

from B to B<sup>-1</sup> amid concerns about corruption and misuse of public resources by Kenyan government officials. With such a scenario, Trump could withdraw this patronage. Harris, on the other hand, may decide to continue nudging the two institutions, especially the IMF, to save the Kenyan government from collapsing for lack of funds. Biden's administration of which she was part of, had invested a lot in making Kenya an ally in a region China has been aggressively wooing.



Another area of interest for Kenya as November 5 draws closer is the yet to be concluded negotiations that resumed in 2022 on bilateral trade and investment agreements. This includes the renewal of the African Growth Opportunity Act (AGOA), under whose framework Kenyan goods have been entering the US market duty-free. The strategic trade talks were initiated during the Trump administration (2016-2020) but stalled when Ruto's predecessor, Uhuru (2013-2022) suspended them. Despite some sticky issues, the negotiations have gone on with the expectations that a new AGOA agreement would be in place by 2025. Kenya's anxiety over the trade pacts would be justified when the policy stance on external trade of each of the two candidates is considered. Harris' position on trade and tariffs remain fuzzy even in her current campaign speeches. When campaigning for Democratic nomination as the presidential candidate in 2016, she had showed disdain for free trade deals and sounded protectionist just like Trump. Biden was openly for free trade policies that defined his administration's foreign economic policies, though focused more on US trade with china. However, in his current campaigns, Trump has reiterated his belief in mercantilist policies, even promising to expand tariffs on almost all

<sup>1</sup> <https://disclosure.spglobal.com/ratings/en/regulatory/article/-/view/type/HTML/id/3236458>

foreign imports. More ominously for Kenya's hopes in AGOA, he has said he will seek Congress's legal approval for the President to impose reciprocal tariffs on any country that does the same on US goods. For Harris, even though her position on tariffs remain unclear, she may not want to undo Biden's promise to give Kenya preferential treatment through AGOA by allowing Kenya to export goods duty free to the US.



Another issue that should interest the Ruto administration is each candidate's views on immigration. This is because Kenya has a sizeable population living in the US, estimated to slightly over 150,000.<sup>2</sup> The Kenyan diaspora in the US comprises students and working immigrants. The immigrants have been a major source of remittances that now rival other sectors of Kenyan economy as top contributors to the country's foreign reserves. Both Harris and Trump are promising immigration reforms. Harris has emphasized the positive contributions immigrants has made to the economic development of the US. Indeed, in her campaigns, she has called America an "immigrant nation." She has promised not to "deport" illegal immigrants but to legalize their stay and to ensure they become citizens. Trump, on his part has promised "the largest domestic deportation in US' history." There is no doubt that some Kenyans could be among the "illegal immigrants." Harris' victory would obviously be preferable for Kenya. Trump's immigration policies that also include several tough

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1231434/number-of-kenyan-emigrants-by-country-of-destination/>

restrictions on the process of acquiring citizenship do not augur well for Kenya's economy as they may substantially reduce the diaspora remittances.



Diplomatically, the Ruto administration, and especially the foreign policy experts should begin considering the possibility of the exit of Meg Whitman, the US ambassador to Kenya, after the November elections. It is no secret that the ambassador has been very instrumental in forging the close relations between her country and Kenya. Specifically, she has helped to win US support for the Ruto administration. She is credited with having organized president Ruto's high profile state visit to Washington during which Kenya bagged many "goodies" from the US government in May, 2024. It is instructive that Meg is a former Republican who was one of the major funders of Trump campaigns in the 2016 elections but crossed over to Biden's side in 2020. One would ordinarily assume that Trump would actually replace her if he wins. Moreover, her influence on US attitude on Kenya would significantly diminish if removed because, as a political appointee, she will not be redeployed to the State Department where she could continue to argue Kenya's case. While it is not guaranteed that Harris would retain her in Kenya, it is highly likely that if Harris enters White House, the foreign policy establishment may want to retain her.

What then should Kenya do to avoid any negative backlash from the outcomes of the forthcoming US elections? First, Kenya could engage the services of some of the influential lobby groups in the US. The lobby groups should be as bipartisan as possible. Second, through lobbies or our Embassy in Washington,

the foreign policy establishment should be engaging Congress men and women, especially ranking members of the House and Senate who have a track record of interest in Kenyan or African Affairs. Third, the government should try to firm up any agreements reached with the IMF and the World Bank so that they are cushioned from interference from any quarter. Fourth, government officials should not make uncoordinated public comments on the US elections, especially the presidential election. Fifth, government responses to international crises that might occur between now and the election day should reflect neutrality and non-alignment which are principles of our foreign policy. Official statements on major international issues should not antagonize either of the two camps in the elections.



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