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Unhappy New Year

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Dear Peter,

1980 was a bad year for West Africa. Coups overturned governments in three countries, rumors of coups unsettled leaders in several other nations. Drought continued to plague the economies of the sahelian countries, while inflation and rising oil prices put all West African national budgets, with the exception of Nigeria's, into the red.

Politically, all is not gloomy. Democracy continued its comeback in two former British colonies, while two francophone states dealt with the sensitive question of succession in their autocratic civilian governments. Economic decay in most of the region, however, may spoil chances for political improvements.

This survey of the past year begins with the four countries I visited in 1980—Senegal, The Gambia, Sierra Leone and Liberia—and concludes with the four countries on my itinerary for 1981—Ivory Coast, Ghana, Guinea and Nigeria.

Senegalese President Leopold Senghor at 74 set what many hope will be a precedent for African leaders by resigning. Although he groomed his successor, Abdou Diouf, in the role of prime minister, Senghor surprised people with the suddenness of his withdrawal. He announced his plans only a few months before stepping down December 31. He has removed himself completely from the political scene, resigning his post as secretary-general of the Parti Socialist and has said he will devote his remaining years to poetry. With a home in France and a French wife, he may not spend much time in his native land.

Senghor left Diouf with a country in the worst shape of its twenty years of independence. Again last year, rainfall was erratic and insufficient, reducing grain yields and livestock herds. The peanut crop, the basis of Senegal's agricultural and industrial economies, has fallen to less than half of normal production. More than ever, Senegal depends on France's largesse for survival.

Economic weakness has eroded the government's political base in the peanut-growing areas. Angered by low prices as well as corruption and mismanagement in the government's produce-marketing agency, some farmers have refused to grow peanuts and have returned to subsistence agriculture.

In this atmosphere of mistrust and insecurity, political opposition parties, legal and illegal, are demanding a role in the govern-

ment. Senegal's political stability in 1981 may depend on Diouf's willingness and ability to answer these demands.

The Gambia also faces another bleak economic year. The tiny country's economy depends on peanuts and tourists. As in neighboring Senegal, the peanut crop suffered from adverse weather conditions. Tourists, with less money to spend, have discovered resorts in southern Europe are cheaper and better run than hotels in Africa. The number of tourists visiting The Gambia fell in 1980 and early reports of this winter's tourist season indicate a further drop in 1981.

Last year The Gambia's political stability was shaken for the first time since independence when the commander of the country's paramilitary police force was murdered by one of his men. In this peaceful country, the effect on the populace was traumatic. Soon after the murder, Senegalese soldiers appeared in the capital guarding key installations. Rumors of a coup attempt were later denied by President Sir Dawda Jawara, but he did accuse Libya's Col. Gadafy of training Gambians to overthrow the government. The Gambian president also banned two leftist political groups, claiming they sought to subvert the democratic process. Although Jawara's explanation of events has not been completely satisfactory, the arrival of the Senegalese troops may have been only an overreaction to events. By the end of the year, The Gambia seemed calm and relaxed once again.

Such was not the case in Sierra Leone. That country is in turmoil and the possibility of a coup is on everyone's mind. President Siaka Stevens, conservatively said to be 75, may retire when his term as chairman of the Organization of African Unity ends in July. Unlike Senghor, he has not designated a successor. The most likely candidate, the first vice president, has just gone on indefinite leave from his duties. The official explanation is ill health, and he is known to have needed extensive medical attention since a 1977 car accident. However, the suspicion remains that Stevens punished his deputy for mishandling a student protest over a teachers' strike at the national university, unnecessarily putting the government in confrontation with the students. No heir to Stevens' rule is now apparent. The second vice president has lost support in his home constituency and seems incapable of leading a country that has been split in two by tribalism since independence.

Sierra Leone's economic outlook is dismal, and unlike its northern neighbors it can't use the weather as an excuse. Bad planning, mismanagement and corruption are responsible for many of the country's economic problems. During the year, Stevens raised the salaries of public employes and other wages are supposed to follow suit. Attempts at price control to keep the raises from merely fueling further inflation have not been successful. The result of the government action will probably be a greater disparity in the earnings of rich and poor, and harder times for those at the lower end of the scale.

Stevens seems to be aware that, in light of the worsening economy, he cannot let the political situation remain as it is. At the year's end, he shook up his cabinet, but he has not made it clear whether he will allow greater political freedom or make his government more repressive.

Liberia made the biggest headlines of any West African state in 1980 with its bloody coup in April. Neighboring states joined in the outcry against the executions of deposed government officials. Yet of the four capitals I visited, only in Monrovia did I find an attitude of pride in country and hope for the future among the young

people. They accused other governments of hypocrisy in condemning the executions but ignoring the oppression of former President William Tolbert's regime. If other West African leaders want to avoid Tolbert's fate, they must respond to their peoples' discontent, not make self-serving statements about peaceful change.

The coup's leader, Master Sergeant Samuel Doe, has shown more control over the government and more earnestness in seeking to alleviate hardships than many people expected. However, his belief in simple and direct solutions to complex problems illustrates why military governments in West Africa have turned national economies into national disasters. Doe's latest attempt to rid the country of its balance-of-payments deficit was an edict appropriating two months' pay from highly paid workers and one month's pay from other workers in a mandatory national savings-bond plan.

More than any other country in West Africa, Liberia's course in 1981 depends on another country. That country is the United States. The U.S. government will have to provide millions of dollars in aid to keep Liberia afloat. U.S. support may also be essential to Doe's future. The Reagan administration would find no lack of applicants for the top job if it decides Doe is not to its liking.

With an agriculturally based, free-market economy and the highest income per capita in West Africa (not counting thinly populated, oil-rich Gabon), the Ivory Coast has been the pet of Western governments, but last year it ran into trouble. The world's leading cocoa exporter, the country lost its gamble to force up prices by keeping its cocoa beans off the market. For the first time in years, the Ivory Coast finds itself dependent on French financial support.

On the political front, 1980 promised much change but gave little. President Felix Houphouet-Boigny, at 76, also on the edge of retirement, began the year by calling for constitutional changes to insure a smooth transition. He also promised more democracy for his one-party state. The results of these initiatives by year's end have not lived up to people's expectations. After contradictory hints on how a successor would be chosen, the president took the decision fully into his own hands with the creation of the office of vice president to be filled by presidential appointment. The electoral process was opened up to allow greater participation in elections for national assembly seats. The people responded by voting out of office 54 of the 80 deputies up for reelection. Although the national assembly is now a different and, on the whole, a younger group, the influence of family associations and wealth does not seem to have altered.

The only good thing one can say about Ghana at the end of 1980 is that its year-old democratically elected government has not been ousted by the military. Jerry Rawlins, the popular leader of the last coup, has repeatedly criticized the government of President Hilla Limann. The Limann government responds nervously, warning Rawlins that the people won't stand for another military takeover. The country's economy remains the sickest in West Africa. The government has done little to raise public confidence in its ability to deal with the financial problems. It mishandled a strike by officers of the national shipping company, botched plans for agricultural development, made a mess of its dealings with the domestic press and granted large increases in parliamentary salaries while calling on other citizens to make sacrifices for the good of the country.

1981 offers little hope for improvement. Ghana can count itself lucky if it still has a civilian government this time next year.

Since leading Guinea to independence in 1958, President Ahmed Sekou Toure has allowed little of what goes on there to reach the out-

side world. This much is known: the economy is weak and political opposition is ruthlessly suppressed. Recently, Sekou Toure opened up his country a bit, seeking the aid of Western industry in exploiting Guinea's mineral wealth. Once a hero of African nationalists, the Guinean president's reputation has tarnished. Historian Basil Davidson accused him of post-colonial imperialism after Guinea claimed territorial rights to much of the ocean off neighboring Guinea-Bissau. Many people wonder if Sekou Toure had anything to do with the November coup in Guinea-Bissau. He lost no time in recognizing the new government, after his relations with the former regime had worsened almost to the point of conflict.

In 1980, Sekou Toure survived an assassination attempt, one of several he has lived through. What will happen in Guinea in 1981 is anybody's guess.

The one exception to the litany of economic failure and political uncertainty in West Africa is Nigeria, where democracy has thrived in a comfortable climate of oil wealth. In October, the nation celebrated its twentieth anniversary as an independent state and its first as a constitutional republic fashioned on the American model. Nigerians took justifiable pride in a year that saw an independent judiciary reprimanding President Shehu Shagari, opposition parties in control of state governments fighting for a larger share of federal oil revenues and the military watching quietly from the barracks after thirteen years of rule.

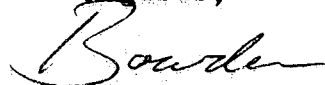
Nigeria has plenty of problems. Corruption, violent crime, the gap between rich and poor are all worse than in other West African countries. The difference is that Nigeria has money. Many Nigerians feel they are no longer part of the Third World. Shagari has not been bashful about assuming a role in world affairs, and he has his country's oil to back him up. More ominously, his defense minister has talked of making Nigeria a nuclear power.

In 1981, news from Nigeria will not be about coups or famines.

A resurgence of Islamic fundamentalism in West Africa, linked with Gadafy's expansionist ambitions, promises to be an important external factor for West African states in 1981. Leaders in the sahelian states of Niger and Mali are worried about the colonel's support for the nomadic Tuareg people in their countries. Libya's merger with Chad at year's end will increase worries about its future plans. (The war in Chad will probably resume because the Chadian vice president, a southerner and the commander of the national army, is unlikely to welcome the Libyan presence.)

Senegal and Nigeria have much to fear from Gadafy's support for revolutionary Islamic fundamentalists. In Nigeria, government officials blamed a fundamentalist sect for riots that shook the northern city of Kano for several days in December, although the sect may not have had any connection with Libya. Gadafy has sheltered a Senegalese religious leader who wants to make his country an Islamic republic. A fundamentalist revival in Senegal could result in civil war. The Mouride brotherhood, a large and influential minority in the country, reveres its founder, Amadou Bamba, almost as a god, which more orthodox sects must view as heresy. The situation seems ripe for more meddling by the Libyan leader.

Regards,



Bowden Quinn