



Setting the Stage for Africa's Democracy



Dr. Christopher Fomunyoh

Extraordinary Profiles



Christopher Fomunyoh with prominent African and American leaders at a conference on African Renaissance, held in Johannesburg, South Africa.

Dr. Christopher Fomunyoh is one of the most respected voices speaking for democracy in Africa. He serves as the senior associate and regional director for Central and West Africa at the National Democratic Institute. In this capacity, he has organized and advised international election observation missions in Benin, Cameroon, Central Africa Republic, Cote d'Ivoire, Ethiopia, Ghana, Liberia, Madagascar and other countries.

He has shared the stage with such political luminaries as President Jimmy Carter and General Colin Powell.

"I think very highly of Colin Powell, the first African-American Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. He was always so humble. I remember being on a mission, an election observation mission with him in Nigeria and sitting there and listening to him engage former Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo and things that Obasanjo could do to ensure the Nigerian people that their voices would be heard and that their votes would count and saying to myself, 'This is an accomplished world leader looking for ways

to give something back to the continent.'"

"In many ways, being in Washington and getting the opportunity to see many American leaders serve their people in the United States but also reach out to the disadvantaged, the poor, the downtrodden in other parts of the world, notably in Africa, has been a true source of inspiration to me."

Hailing from Cameroon, Fomunyoh's achievements to inspire democracy throughout Africa have put him on the world's stage and his efforts have garnered international attention and respect from world leaders. His opinions and thoughts on democracy are often featured on television networks such as CNN, PBS NewsHour, Voice of America, BBC, Radio France Internationale (RFI), as well in major national and international newspapers, including the New York Times, the Washington Post and International Herald Tribune.

As founder and president of the Fomunyoh Foundation, for the past 12

years his mission has been "trying in our own small way to have an impact on the lives of people in Cameroon. The foundation was borne of an idea that came to me and members of my family and friends who had heard that those of us who had been fortunate to leave Cameroon and to have a better way of living elsewhere should find opportunities to give something back to the community, however modest it could be."

"The idea was to launch a foundation that, first, would encourage people to espouse volunteerism and philanthropy and, in that process, also provide some training and support to small organizations that are working very hard in Cameroon to promote democracy and human rights and that are doing things that can raise citizens' awareness and also improve upon their wellbeing."

Dr. Fomunyoh has traveled throughout Africa, Europe and North America. He holds a Licence en Droit from





Christopher Fomunyoh with former Ghanaian President Jerry J. Rawlings in South Africa.

Yaounde University in Cameroon, a Masters Degree in international law from Harvard Law School, and a Ph.D. in Political Science from Boston University. He is also an adjunct faculty member at the Africa Center for Strategic Studies and a former adjunct professor of African politics and government at Georgetown University. He and his family reside in the Washington, D.C. area.

The founder of Exceptional People Magazine was delighted to speak with Dr. Fomunyoh about his vision for change in Cameroon, as well as the continent of Africa.

Monica: Would you mind describing the function of the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs?

Mr. Fomunyoh: The National Democratic Institute for International Affairs, commonly known as NDI, is a non-profit organization, a non-governmental organization that was created in the mid-'80s to help support and promote democracy worldwide. So we are non-partisan in the

sense that we don't endorse candidates. We conduct programs that transcend democratic processes and institutions rather than specific individual candidates in the countries in which we work.

Monica: What are some of the things that you promote or focus on through the organization?

Mr. Fomunyoh: For example, NDI in the last three decades has worked with leaders of political parties. You know, coming from the background that many countries have only recently begun the transition from one-party states or countries under military rule into becoming functioning democracies. What has been commonly referred to as the third wave of democratization really began in the late '80s with the collapse of the Berlin Wall, the end of communism, the end of apartheid in South Africa and all these new changes which various countries have had to embrace.

NDI has worked to provide training and capacity building to newly-elected members of parliament in those countries, to leaders who are creating new political parties and dealing with political pluralism for

the first time in their lives. We have provided capacity building and technical assistance to civil society organizations, women's groups that are seeking a voice in the political process as well as young men and women who are from human rights organizations or advocacy groups that are interested in democratic governance.

Monica: How did your interest in the political scene come about?

Mr. Fomunyoh: Well, in many ways, it's a combination of two factors, one being my inborn aspiration to reach out to people and to work with people. I look back at my life and my childhood years, the years that I spent in primary school and in secondary school, how I interacted with my schoolmates and always took a leadership role.

There was part of me that always wanted to provide leadership. And it so happened that when I came to the United States for graduate studies, at the time when I just finished my master's degree in International Law at Harvard University, at Harvard Law School -- I accomplished a Ph.D. in Political Science at Boston University that coincided with the collapse of the Berlin Wall and the resurgence of this democratization wave around the world. So I felt like it was a combination of having the desire to do good things for people and then being in the right place at the right time with the right kind of background. So when NDI approached me in 1992 and asked if I could join the organization upon terminating my Ph.D., I was very glad to do that in 1993.

Monica: Speaking of democracies in other societies in the world, what is your opinion on -- if you don't mind giving me your opinion on a couple of them?

Mr. Fomunyoh: Sure. First of all, I believe very strongly that democracy is something that people aspire to in every corner of the world, which people in Africa aspire to live under the same freedoms and enjoy the same liberties that citizens in established democracies may take for granted. So I think that it's an inner human aspiration for democratic governance and all of the freedoms that we have come to enjoy in established democracies.

At the same time, I also think that the issues of human rights, the freedom of women to participate in political processes, the right of young people to advocate on behalf of citizens and to interact with their governments, these are responsibilities that citizens would like to embrace everywhere in the world. And so for me, it's always important to break down the notion of democracy into those small things that can mean a lot to people at the grassroots level.

Twenty-two decades ago there were only four countries on the entire African continent that had multi-party systems. Those countries were Senegal, The Gambia, Botswana and Mauritius. The rest of the 48 countries – the rest of the 49 countries were either under military rule or one-party states. When you look back at Africa today, I am delighted that 11 countries are now considered totally free, and 19 others are considered as partially free.

So the continent has gone from four countries in 1990 to about 30 countries today that are considered free enough to allow for democracy to take root and that, for me, is an accomplishment for the continent, an accomplishment of which Africans ought to be proud. So you can cite countries such as Ghana, Botswana,

Christopher Fomunyoh speaking to Cameroonians and friends of Cameroon in Montreal, Canada, in 2009, on the role of the Cameroonian Diaspora.

South Africa, Benin, Mali, Mauritius and Zambia. These are all African countries that are making tremendous progress to strengthen democratic institutions and to make all Africans feel that you don't have to leave the continent to be able to live in a democratic society.

Monica: Would you say that those countries are perfect examples of how the rest of Africa can improve their democratic governance?

Mr. Fomunyoh: Absolutely and especially because a decade or two ago, when you had a discussion about democracy on the African continent, you would be hard-pressed to find examples of African countries that you could cite or African countries that could be emulated by other African countries. But today, when I talk about democracy in Cameroon, I am not comparing Cameroon and France. I am talking about Cameroon and Mali and Cameroon and Benin and the things that Benin has done well for the Beninese people, the things that the government of Mali is doing well for the people of Mali, that the government of Cameroon ought to be doing for its own people.

The more countries we can have on the continent that are doing well, the easier it's going to be for all Africans to realize that democracy is not a foreign concept. It's something that is doing well on our continent, and it's something that should do well all across the continent.



Monica: In all of your experience working in this area, can you recall any times when the U.S. has actually tried to – not impose, but at least advise any of the African countries on how to establish a democracy?

Mr. Fomunyoh: Yes. I should say that the work that is done by organizations such as NDI and also the International Republican Institute and many other U.S. based organizations – that this work is funded for the most part by the U.S. government either through the U.S. Agency for International Development or through the State Department or through the National Endowment for Democracy. And these are all entities that use U.S. public funding to help support and encourage the institutionalization of democracy in various countries in Africa.



Christopher Fomunyoh with His Excellency Victor Smith, close friend and current Ghanaian Ambassador to the Czech Republic.

We also note that President Barack Obama has been very straightforward in articulating his policy, the policy of his government towards Africa and in underscoring four priority areas, democracy and good governance being the first one.

The resolution of conflicts is the second one. HIV/AIDS and health care are the third priority and the promotion of agriculture being the fourth. So if his first priority is democratic governance or helping African countries put in place democratic processes and systems, there is no doubt in my mind that he and his government will continue to make resources available for NDI and similar organizations to continue in this line of work.

Monica: You are the founder and president of the Fomunyoh Foundation. What is the main mission or the purpose of the foundation?

Mr. Fomunyoh: Sure. The Fomunyoh Foundation was launched in 1999, and so for the past 12 years we have been trying in our own small way to have an impact on the lives of people in Cameroon. The foundation was borne of an idea that came to me

and members of my family and friends who had heard that those of us who had been fortunate to leave Cameroon and have a better way of living elsewhere should find opportunities to give something back to the community, however modest it could be.

So the idea was to launch a foundation that, first, would encourage people to espouse volunteerism and philanthropy and, in that process, also provide training and support to small organizations that are working very hard in Cameroon to promote democracy and human rights and that are doing things that can raise citizens' awareness and also improve their wellbeing. So in the last 12 years the foundation has tried to do that in its own small way, and my hope is that in the years ahead we'll find ways to do more.

Monica: What is your view of the current governmental structure in your homeland of Cameroon?

Mr. Fomunyoh: Well, definitely I would say that, first of all, Cameroon is not among the 30 countries that I just mentioned based on Freedom House's ratings. Freedom House, which is an internationally known

organization that rates governance processes around the world, recently issued its report for 2009, and it stated that Cameroon was one of 16 African countries that are considered as "not free".

That's a track record which the country has kept, unfortunately, for over two decades now. Organizations such as Transparency International, The Committee to Protect Journalists, Amnesty International and even the State Department's human rights reports have consistently decried or criticized the fact that the current government of Cameroon is not living up to standard when it comes to democratic governance and respect for human rights.

Monica: In addition to establishing freedom, what other issues would you like to see addressed in Cameroon?

Mr. Fomunyoh: There are several issues that will need to be addressed. I would say, first of all, the issue of democratic governance is a big issue because you need to have an executive branch in Cameroon that's totally accountable to the people of Cameroon beginning from the very top, from the head of state himself, the prime minister and members of Cabinet, and that currently is not happening. You need to have a legislative branch of government that can exercise proper oversight over the executive branch and that can represent the voices of the citizens of the country.

Secondly, you also need to create an enabling environment that can foster entrepreneurship, which can generate and stimulate Cameroonians in their entrepreneurial spirit. They need to be able to create private enterprises and attract foreign investors because it is through these investments in the private sector that you can create jobs

and contribute to the economic development of the country.

Thirdly, I really think that Cameroon needs to mend its relationships with the international community and development partners. With the track record that the government currently has, it's extremely difficult for private investors, as well as foreign partners, to want to invest their resources in Cameroon because they are unsure how those resources would be managed.

Fourthly, I would say we need to create an environment in Cameroon where each and every Cameroonian, irrespective of their province of origin, their region of origin, their linguistic capabilities, will feel comfortable that they can make a contribution to the development of their country and be appreciated for it.

Monica: You have met with many heads of state as well as other political leaders over the years. How are you leveraging that to help empower the people of Africa and to incite positive political and economic change?

Mr. Fomunyoh: I have been very fortunate in my life and my career to benefit from the advice of a number of African leaders, current and recent past. And in 2005, for example, I helped create, launch an initiative called the African Statesman's Initiative. This was an initiative to encourage former African heads of state, those who have credible democratic credentials, to engage in humanitarian causes across the continent, to become peacemakers, peace builders and mediators in various conflicts. They should become engaged in monitoring of elections and become ambassadors of goodwill on health-related issues.



Christopher Fomunyoh with former African Heads of State, all seated in the front row, namely: Nicephore Soglo of Benin; Ket Masire of Botswana; Pierre Buyoya of Burundi; Aristide Pereira of Cape Verde; Jerry J. Rawlings of Ghana; and Kenneth Kaunda of Zambia.

And we succeeded in 2005 to have 17 former African heads of state meet in Bamako, Mali and agree to continue to play a positive role in political and economic development issues across the African continent. I am pleased to see today that, after that initiative, we now have former president of Mozambique, President Joaquim Chissano, the former president of Benin, President Christophe Soglo, who have taken the leadership in what they now call the Africa Forum, which is an assembly of former leaders who are involved in conflict mediation and conflict resolution initiatives across the continent.

And I think that every time Africans see that former presidents play a constructive role, the message will go out very strongly to incoming presidents that there is life after the state house and that you don't have to make yourself president for life in your country. You don't have to change the constitution of your country to become president for life because if you serve your people well, even when you are out of office, you will be respected for your contribution and the world will continue to draw on your experience and your goodwill.

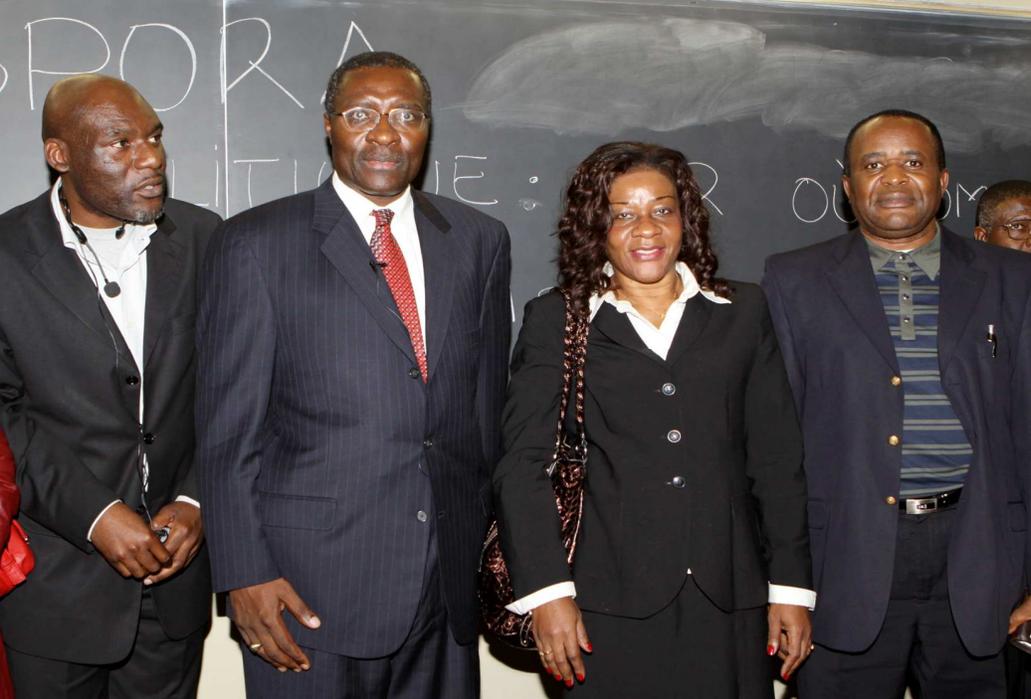
Monica: Do you consider yourself to be an agent of change or the vehicle that brings other people together who then create the change?



Mr. Fomunyoh: Well, I feel that there are those of us who have been fortunate to gain exposure on how things can be done well, how good governance works, owe a duty to our continent and to our respective countries to give something back. And it is extremely difficult for someone like me to go around the continent helping other countries make a difference and not want to do something for my own country. I think I also owe that to the people of Cameroon.

And so ultimately I think that it will be important that I also find a way to make my own contribution to the change that comes about in my country of Cameroon.

At the same time I realize that change is a collective endeavor that each citizen – each one has got to bring their contribution to the table because no one individual can do it alone. And so



Christopher Fomunyoh with fellow Cameroonians in Montreal, Canada, including the traditional Queen of Bonedale, Douala, Ikollo N'Doumbe Jacqueline to the left and veteran journalist Cyrille Ekwalla to the right.

whether you take the lead in providing that change or you come forth with ideas and recommendations of how that change can be brought about, once you are able to galvanize a cross-section of society in this collective endeavor, I think the chances of success are extremely high.



Monica: Generally speaking, women in Africa have always been active in keeping the home in order and taking care of the children. In your efforts to help bring democracy to all of Africa, what changes would you like to see take place for women?

Mr. Fomunyoh: Well, you have raised a very important point because, in Africa, women constitute slightly more than 50 percent of the population. In many countries women already play a leadership role. They run the household, which is an extremely important task. Sometimes they are the ones who are involved in economic activities, especially in the rural areas, that can put food on the table for the family and who can become involved in a way that will raise

the family's standard of living. We need to provide the same kinds of opportunities for these women, not just to play a backseat role in the rural areas, in the small family units, but also to project this leadership at the national level.

In Senegal, for example, in 2002 NDI engaged in a program to help Senegalese women who were very dynamic become more active in the governance process in their country. We trained close to 2000 women and encouraged them to run for office as local counselors. Many of them ran for office. About 1400 of them were elected as counselors and members of municipalities. The hope is that some of them will become mayors and heads of councils and they will take this cumulative experience to run for offices at the national level, for parliament.

During this conference that we had for heads of states in Bamako, Mali in 2005, one of the things that I said at the time was our hope – because this was a room full of men. All former presidents on the continent now are men. And I said at the time in 2005 that our hope was that sooner rather

than later, we would be able to look at an Africa where women can run for president and win elections. And lo and behold, a few months after the Bamako conference, the first woman president was elected in Africa in the person of Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, who is currently the president of Liberia and who is doing a fantastic job helping that country rebuild after about 14 years of civil war.

And so by Ellen Johnson's example, women in Africa can now feel empowered and emboldened to also strive to be heads of state in their respective countries.

Monica: Would you say that the most important way that women can become involved as far as helping to bring about self-sufficiency in Africa is through participating in the political process?

Mr. Fomunyoh: Yes, it is true of participating in the political process. It is also true through other means, which I think we have to pay attention to. One is education. Access to education is crucial. In the past, in many African societies when families were strapped for cash and couldn't afford to send all of their kids to school, the preference would be to send the boys and have the girls stay home. But today I think it's important – it's extremely crucial for any government seeking development to provide equal opportunities for girls, girls and boys, so that girls can have access to education because once they are educated, then they can compete equally with male politicians.

The second avenue that needs to be explored is the avenue of small business enterprises, economic freedoms and the ability – creating an environment where women will have the ability to operate their own businesses

and have a sense of economic independence so that they can make decisions that impact their lives.

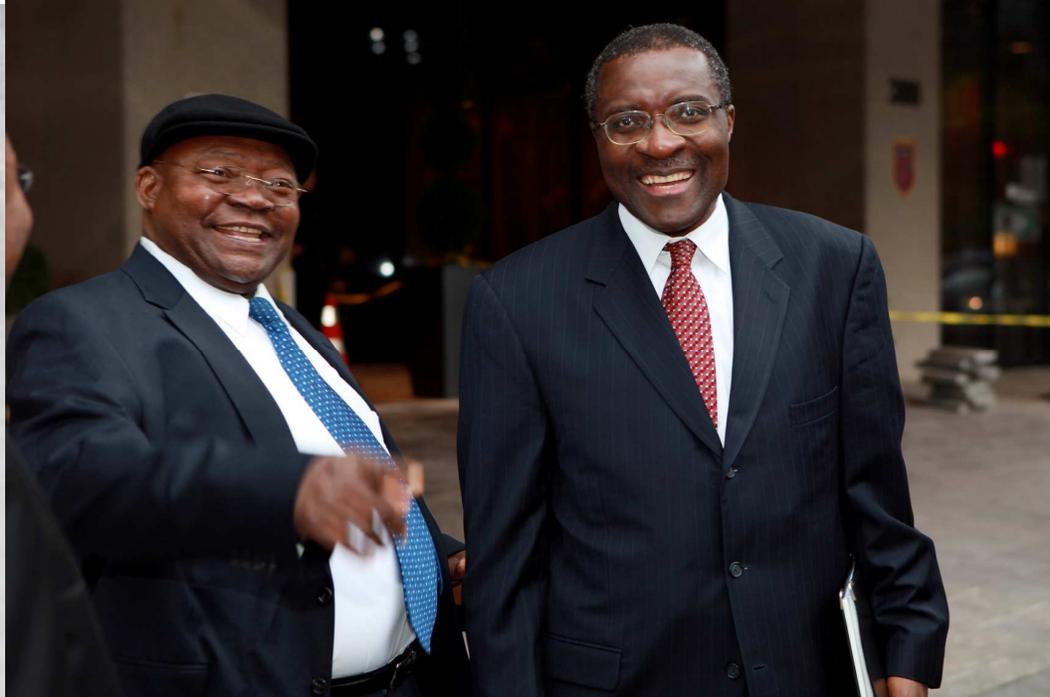
So I think that economic empowerment is an important leverage that we need to provide to women if we want them to have equal say or an important say in the way in which African countries are run.

Monica: You believe in the renewal of political leadership on a global level. Would you say that thinking also applies to those who have been very effective for many years?

Mr. Fomunyoh: Well, we are all human, and you can only be effective to a certain point. The running of a country or managing the affairs of state is a very demanding task. And if you do it well, then, obviously, there will be a time when you will run out of energy. If you don't do it well, then there's even more reason to create an opportunity where others can also come to the forefront and make meaningful contributions.

And so when you see the rest of the world today, the leaders that we have for the United States, a young talented leader in his mid-40s, in France, a president in his early 50s. These are leaders who want to raise the standards of their countries to another level because they think about the world today and they think of the 21st and 22nd centuries.

On the other hand, if you have leaders who were born in the early 1920s or 1930s that are still clinging to power, it's difficult for them to conceptualize the fact that the world today is in the 21st century. It becomes very important for people to know that when you have an elected mandate, it is a mandate from the people to serve them for a given time and to create an environ-



Christopher with close friend and US-based Simon Ekiko. Chris and Simon worked for Cameroon Airlines, in Africa in the 1980s; and more significantly, Simon was the principal photographer at Chris' wedding in 1982 in North West Cameroon.

ment where a renewal of political leadership can take place in a way that continues to move the country forward.

Monica: Overall, what is your greatest vision not only for Africa as a whole but for your native homeland of Cameroon?

Mr. Fomunyoh: Well, I have always said that Cameroon really should be a shining star on the African continent because, first of all, it's blessed by its history and its geography. Its geography puts it right at the center of the continent, a good mixing point between north and South Africa, as well as between west and east Africa. Its history places it as a country that has experienced Portuguese, German, French, and British colonization and that has the diversity of historical background as well as cultural diversity. It's a country whose citizens are bilingual and, therefore, well poised to be able to compete in today's world globally.

And so my vision for Cameroon is a country that can be the shining star of the African continent, that can project what is best in our continent, not just

in terms of material well-being, but in terms of human capital and the vision that can move the continent to take its seat as a global actor in today's world.



So I envision a Cameroon that would be vibrant, where the rights and liberties of all citizens will be respected, where businesses can invest with the certainty that their investments will be well-protected, where civilians can live side by side with security services without feeling a sense of harassment, where democratic institutions will function such that a leader would not feel compelled to remain in power for decades in order to derive personal benefit. ♦

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