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Anti-China Sentiment in Africa: Why Are They Unwelcomed?

By Loro Horta

Synopsis

In recent years attacks against Chinese citizens and property have increased throughout Africa. Why is there a growing backlash against the Asian giant?

Commentary

AN ESTIMATED one million Chinese are believed to be living in Africa and thousands of Chinese companies operate in the continent. China is now Africa's biggest investor and trading partner. Even critics must recognise that China has brought significant benefits to Africa. However, relations have not been completely harmonious.

In December 2014 violent riots broke out in Madagascar when workers at a Chinese-owned sugar mill burned the factory and looted sugar stocks. The workers were demanding better pay and permanent contracts for some 1300 seasonal workers. The police evacuated all Chinese nationals where the riots occurred to the capital, Antananarivo.

Putting things into context

Beijing berated the Madagascan authorities for failing to protect Chinese interests and demanded compensation while state-owned media in China denounced xenophobia and racism. In Zambia three Chinese managers were killed by rioting workers at a copper mine in 2010. In recent years Chinese workers and managers have also been killed in Equatorial Guinea and Sudan. In Angola, the Chinese ambassador claimed that Chinese citizens have been attacked.

Among the most common complaints against the Chinese are allegations that the Chinese do not create local jobs but import thousands of workers from China. For those Africans who are employed long working hours and poor pay are among other common grievances. The Chinese are also accused of ignoring local communities and cultural insensitivity, preferring to deal often with corrupt and despotic local elites.

Is there growing anti-Chinese sentiment throughout Africa? Yes, to a certain extent in parts of the continent. However, the reality is more complex. Most of the attacks against Chinese nationals and property are not motivated by anti-Chinese sentiment. As the number of Chinese nationals and businesses operating in Africa grows the likelihood of them being targeted also increases.

It is worth noting that the Chinese have been regularly targeted in countries where there is a serious crime problem that affects all regardless of ethnicity. However in Cape Verde, one of Africa's most stable and prosperous nations, such incidents are rare.

Is China unique?

In countries where there is a certain element of anti-Chinese sentiment this is usually a result of social jealousy as Chinese tend to be prosperous while many of the societies in which they operate lack their entrepreneurial spirit. This problem is not exclusive to the Chinese, though. Anti-Indian sentiment is also quite strong in East Africa. Anti-French riots have occurred throughout Francophone Africa.

Allegations of exploitation and maltreatment are the result of the fact that Chinese companies tend to be ignorant or not familiar with local laws. Also labour laws in China have only recently been brought to international standards. In the 1970s Japanese companies were also regarded as highly exploitative throughout Southwest Asia and even Southeast Asia. For decades the US ignored local communities and dealt with some of the worst despots in Africa.

China must learn fast

While Chinese companies' behaviour in Africa is not unique and has extensive historical precedent, a global and highly connected world today means minor incidents and grievances can be easily blown out of proportion and rapidly escalate into violence. China now operates in a more unforgiving environment than the US and Japan faced decades ago. Western media that still dominates the global information scene is rather ill-disposed towards China.

Complaints about failure to create jobs and lack of engagement with local communities are fair. China should do more to address these issues. Leaders in Africa must also understand that they need China and that playing with anti-Chinese sentiment for political gain is a bad business proposition.

The developing world, particularly Africa which is the least developed, has and can continue to benefit from its ties with China. While China is right to point out that the West is in no position to give moral sermons, Beijing should perhaps consider learning from the mistakes of the West and ignore its occasional hypocritical sermons.

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