

Cornered by African youth, Macron intends to repair FrancAfrique

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French President Emmanuel Macron delivers a speech during a plenary session at the Africa-France [File: Ludovic Marin/ AFP]

Paris, October 12 (RHC)-- Cheikh Fall did not hold back last week when he saw French President Emmanuel Macron during a plenary session of a France-Africa conference. "I asked Macron to seek forgiveness from Africans, stop empowering African dictators and stop the pseudo paternalistic cooperation," the Senegalese social entrepreneur told Al Jazeera, recalling the exchange.

Fall was one of several young Africans who peppered Macron with unfiltered criticism of France during Friday's event, seen as part of the French president's attempt to reshape his country's relations with former colonies on the continent.

In a bid to leave the infamous legacy of FrancAfrique – a decade-old shadowy network of French politicians and African elites aiming to maintain French domination in post-colonial Africa – behind, Macron invited hundreds of young businesspeople, artists and researchers to the meeting in Montpellier – but no African heads of state or government leaders.

Since coming to power in 2017, 43-year-old Macron has presented himself as the standard-bearer of a new generation that aims to start a new chapter between Paris and its former colonies after a long and disturbing history that haunts contemporary France to this day.

But specific instances from that troubled past apparently caught him off guard on the stage as he awkwardly listened to young Africans who assailed Paris's "arrogance" and "paternalism" in its asymmetric relations with African countries and urged him to offer an apology for colonial-era crimes.

Cornered by candid criticism, Macron promised an honest assessment of the colonial past. "We must recognise this responsibility and bear it," he said. "It is part of our past and of the relationship."

Analysts said the conference took place as Macron aims to divert the focus of ties from the colonial past, with France finding itself in a fierce competition of power with growing Chinese, Russian and Turkish involvement in its "backyard".

In this sense, the French president has taken a number of steps including commissioning a report that found that Paris bears "overwhelming responsibilities" over the Rwandan genocide and was "blind" to preparations for the 1994 massacres in which about 800,000 people were killed.

However, as much as the report marked a rare confession by the French state, it also cleared Paris of complicity in the genocide and carefully placed blame on the then-President Francois Mitterrand instead of the French state itself.

Separately, Macron embraced another state report on colonial rule in Algeria that recommended the establishment of a "memories and truth" commission but ruled out an official apology for the crimes committed.

Macron has also agreed to return some of the artefacts stolen from African countries during colonisation; to declassify secret files on the assassination of anti-imperialist Burkina Faso leader Thomas Sankara; and to reform, not end, the CFA franc, a French-backed currency used by former French colonies in West Africa that is seen by many as a symbol of neo-colonialism.

Nathaniel Powell, an analyst at Oxford Analytica, said such steps were symbolic and not structural gestures. "They are illustrative of Macron's longer-term soft-power aspirations of overcoming anti-French sentiment while maintaining the centrality of France as a privileged African partner," Powell told Al Jazeera.

He said there was a clash between these aspirations and the security interests of the French state. "None of the steps can alter the 'hard' aspects of the relationship – support for autocracies, ambivalence about democratic aspirations, a mindset hyper-focused on security interests and a kind of autocratic

political stability that benefits those interests. As long as those remain the pillars of France's African policy, then nothing else matters very much," Powell said.

In fact, many former French presidents, such as Nicolas Sarkozy and Francois Hollande, have attempted to reshape France's engagement in Africa but ended up leading the military operations on the continent.

Professor Bruno Charbonneau, at Canada's Royal Military College Saint-Jean, said this was not a coincidence as he highlighted the historical legacies that define the ties between France and a number of African countries. "Three structural factors always come into play: One, the French military has an institutional interest in sustaining French military engagement in Africa, or at least sustaining the capacity to intervene; and it also has much influence into the policymaking process and decision-making when it comes to Francophone Africa," Charbonneau told Al Jazeera.

"Second, whatever the context or situation, Francophone African elites expect France to intervene and be part of the discussion, knowing that they can fall back on Paris for help," he said. "Lastly, at the UN Security Council, France is recognised to be the penholder and diplomatic leader for all things related to Francophone Africa."

Still, France has found itself increasingly at loggerheads with a number of its former colonies, facing waves of rising discontentment. Earlier this month, Macron triggered a fresh crisis with Algeria when, according to the French daily Le Monde, he said the former French colony was ruled by a "political-military system" and that its official history has been "totally re-written" based on "a discourse of hatred towards France".

The Algerian presidency swiftly hit back at Macron's "insulting" remarks, while Foreign Minister Ramtane Lamamra said France needs to "decolonise" its history and free itself of certain attitudes which are linked to an ideology that normalised "the crime against humanity which was the colonisation of Algeria, Mali and the colonisation of so many African people".

Meanwhile, in Mali, the reports of possible deployment of mercenaries hired by the controversial Wagner Group in the country has added another layer to already tense ties between Paris and the soldiers behind two military coups since August 2020.

France, which has deployed more than 5,000 soldiers across the Sahel region, strongly opposes such a move, worrying the mercenaries would undermine the France-led military operations against armed groups affiliated with ISIL (ISIS) and al-Qaeda.

On the other hand, Malian leaders present the possible deployment as "Plan B" in the fight against the armed groups, accusing France of "abandoning" Mali following its decision to reduce its troops by about half and close down military bases.

The rising tensions have also come at a time when anti-French sentiment has become widely popular among Malians who accuse Paris of failing to contain the escalating violence and pursuing a hidden agenda.

Macron's approach to military takeovers in Mali and Chad has also led many to question France's priorities in the region. While the French president firmly rejected the two coups in Mali and urged for democratic governance, he quickly endorsed the military power grab in Chad after the death of President Idriss Deby, a vital figure in France's security apparatus in the region for decades.

For Ndongo Samba Sylla, a Senegalese development economist, last week's conference was just a rebranding of France's neocolonial engagement with Africa. "The reality is that Francafrigue is out of breath and it needs a new look. France is inventing its African civil society and co-opting its own African intellectuals in order to give the illusion of change," Sylla told Al Jazeera.

“What credibility can be given to this rebranding exercise when Macron himself doesn’t hesitate to chew up French civil society and to destroy democratic expression in Francophone Africa by endorsing military coups and dynastic successions,” he asked.

Nonetheless, Fall is hopeful the event will help forge healthier relations between France and African countries. “It’s a way to breathe new life into the relationship. I want the summit to be a new platform to redefine the relations,” Fall said. “It’s time to define the possible futures of FrancAfrique.”

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