

INTERVIEW KENYA-SWITZERLAND RELATIONS

Strong devolution best serves the people – Swiss President



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The President of the Swiss Confederation, Alain Berset, will be on an official visit to Kenya from July 9-10 to strengthen ties to Kenya and identify other areas of cooperation, particularly on the Big Four agenda. Here, he talks about the visit.

Did you grow up saying to yourself, “One day I will be President?”

Switzerland has a unique political system where power is not concentrated in one set of hands. The seven members of government work as a team to find good solutions to Switzerland’s challenges. The President takes on a representative role during his or her year in office. I always wanted to be a public servant and work for the Swiss people and I am happy to serve the Swiss people this year as their President.

What is the immediate agenda of your visit?

The main reason for my official visit is to reaffirm the long and productive relations between our two countries. In the 21st century, our goal must be to broaden and deepen these bilateral relations. One important aspect is Switzerland’s close cooperation with Kenya in the fight against corruption. Switzerland and Kenya have been working together to fight corruption for a number of years.

Switzerland was for many decades associated with secretive banking practices. This led to Switzerland being accused of being complicit in corruption, which has frustrated the efforts at economic development in many African countries. Is Switzerland a safe haven for illegally acquired funds?

Switzerland has had anti money laundering legislation in place for quite some time now. Today, Switzerland’s financial centre only accepts money from legal sources. If money of corrupt origin somehow finds its way into Swiss banks, the Swiss government blocks and returns those assets to the people of the state of origin.

Perhaps the best-known example involved Switzerland and Nigeria where General Sani Abacha had taken advantage of Switzerland’s financial centre to hide hundreds of millions of dollars. A specific mechanism was put in place to return this money to the Nigerian



Swiss President
Alain Berset
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people. I am hopeful that a similar return of assets will happen with regard to Kenya. Money from the Anglo Leasing corruption case that found its way to Switzerland has been frozen. Pending the conclusion of judicial proceedings, currently ongoing in the Kenyan courts, the Swiss government will return those assets to the Kenyan people.

And the other reasons for your visit?

Another important aspect of my visit is a discussion on our long humanitarian traditions. Both Switzerland and Kenya have a long history of extending help to refugees. Switzerland supports the Kenyan and local authorities with a ‘Skills for Life’ programme, providing vocational training for refugees and the host community in Kakuma.

As my portfolio as a minister in-

cludes public health, I am also here to see how Switzerland and Kenya can work together in this area.

In Kenya we know Switzerland to have set the global benchmark in tourism. How do you see our cooperation in this field nowadays?

In the 1970s, Switzerland and Kenya worked together to set up Kenya Utalii College as a capacity-building and job-creation initiative. Utalii provided Kenyan professionals for the Kenyan tourism industry. And today, many of the managers at Kenya’s four and five star hotels come from Utalii.

More recently, another Swiss-Kenyan partnership invested in Kenya’s tourism, this time not at the initiative of our governments. The Boma International Hospitality College is a kind of joint venture of the Kenya Red Cross Society and a Swiss hospitality school based in Lucerne.

The jobs created in our tourism sector benefited our country very much. But now we face a major crisis in youth unemployment. What could we learn from Swit-

zerland in this regard?

One of the key factors in Switzerland’s sustainable economic success and low youth unemployment is its system of vocational education and training. There are Swiss businesses in Kenya that already provide vocational training to local staff, thereby preparing them for the job market. So broadening such a scheme could certainly be one idea.

What is your message to ordinary Kenyans?

Kenya gained independence only 55 years ago, and in that time a great deal of progress has been made. Devolution is only five years old in Kenya and remarkable results have already been achieved.

But I would also remind the people of Kenya that any such foundational change takes time. We in Switzerland have been working at devolved government for more than 700 years. I fundamentally believe that a strongly devolved system of government and a truly democratic political system is what best serves the rights and interests of ordinary people.



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