

Interview with H. E. Mr. Ahmed Araïta Ali, Ambassador of the Republic of Djibouti to Japan

Djibouti Pursuing Partnerships with Japanese Business

By Japan SPOTLIGHT

As TICAD VII in Yokohama on Aug. 28-30, 2019 is a good occasion to revisit the issue of Africa-Japan relations, *Japan SPOTLIGHT* had the opportunity to interview Djiboutian Ambassador H.E. Ahmed Araïta Ali, who has been in Japan for a long time and has worked actively to consolidate the partnership between Japan and Djibouti.

(Interviewed on July 17, 2019)

Introduction

JS: Could you please talk a little bit about your experience in Japan and Asia?

Ali: Thank you so much for this opportunity. I have been the ambassador of Djibouti to Japan since 2008. In May-June 2008 I presented my credential to the emperor of Japan, and since I am also covering nine other countries (South Korea, Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, Indonesia, Australia and New Zealand) there are so many things to do between Asia and Africa. I started my career as a high school teacher and then was principal of a high school, and advisor at the Ministry of Education. I was also involved in the Social Fund Project in charge of rehabilitation of social infrastructures. Then I became a diplomat and I am delighted to be in Asia, as it is increasingly becoming an engine for development in Africa, while Africa frequently offers opportunities. As the ambassador of Djibouti and as the vice dean of the African Group, I am trying to build bridges between Japan and Africa, and of course between Asia and Africa. My country aims to work with the Japanese government, private sector and civil society. I am learning every day, and I think this is very important. For me, Japan is like an open book, and Asia too.

JS: As an education expert, how do you see schools in Japan?

Ali: I have visited some high schools in Yokohama and also universities. The curriculum is adapted to reality. We can see the coexistence between tradition and modernity. The ambiance at



H. E. Mr. Ahmed Araïta Ali

schools is very exciting; the center of the system is the student. Maybe they are working intensively, but I think that the way the system is managed is very efficient. That is evident in how well developed Japan is, and how Japan is followed all over the world as an example of individual equality. We are trying from our side also to build links between Japanese and Djiboutian universities. Following March 11, 2011, I went to Minamisoma to express my solidarity. The local people did not forget that, and so they invited 10 students last year from Djibouti to visit a school there. We are trying step-by-step to build this kind of link.

Economy & History of Djibouti

JS: Djibouti seems to have very rich tourism resources. It also enjoys a relatively high GDP per capita in Africa. Could you briefly explain the Djiboutian economy?

Ali: Djibouti is in the Horn of Africa. We do not have oil, but the location is like oil for us. We were a French colony for more than 100 years, but since 1977 we have been an independent country. Our economy is based on services. We do not have a lot of minerals but we are a gateway to 108 million Ethiopians. Our neighbor, Ethiopia, has no port so we are the port through which everything comes into Ethiopia. That means that our economy is almost 80% based on services – ports, railways, roads and also enterprise zones. We have one of the biggest enterprise zones in Africa (akin to Singapore) where the private sector from Japan, France, the United States and China can be implemented. Agriculture is not so developed but we

have a relationship with the Tokyo University of Agriculture. We do not have much industry but the enterprise zone is open and small industries come from all over the world. We have relatively good economic growth – around 6-7%.

JS: Your economy is service-based, and that might explain why you enjoy a higher GDP per capita.

Ali: Indeed, and we are also a very safe country. As you know, we host the Self-Defense Forces (SDF) of Japan, and also we are trying to develop tourism because Djibouti is like a geological open book. You have the Rift, the separation between Arabian and African tectonic plates, located one hour by road from Djibouti city. If you go to the sea you can dive and touch the plate under the sea. It is very significant scientifically and geologically. We are not attracting mass tourism for now but more scientific tourists who are interested in tectonic plates, volcanology, and the salt lake from where we export salt to Japan.

JS: I am inquisitive about Djibouti's history, in particular the relationship with France.

Ali: As you know, we were colonized by the French, meaning that our official languages are French and Arabic. The national languages are Afar and Somali. So we are surrounded by Ethiopia, Somalia, Eritrea, and in front of us we have Yemen and Saudi Arabia on the other side. We are African; we are Arab and French speakers. The French came in the era when Europeans were colonizing the African continent – the British were in Yemen but in Africa were in Somalia and Kenya, while the only French presence in East Africa was in Djibouti. We only just gained our independence in 1977 because of our strategic location – France decided to remain in our country and that is why we speak French and why our curriculum used to be in French. After independence, we opted to continue a good relationship with France, and the French army remains as we have a historical and cultural connection. France also tries to aid us with development. There is no philanthropy, but only win-win partnerships like we have with other partners.

JS: France is a major tourist country and perhaps Djibouti has been influenced by the luxury hotels in France?

Ali: Yes, and culturally also we are Francophone and part of the family of French-speaking regions like Québec, Switzerland, Senegal,

and North and Western Africa. We also have in common with France historical references. For example, Arthur Rimbaud, the famous poet, lived here for a year, and Jacques Cousteau, the renowned oceanologist and explorer, was also in Djibouti. So these kinds of links consolidate our relationship. The luxury hotels are not French – we have the Sheraton and the Kempinski. We also share a common approach to gastronomy with France, so when you go to Djibouti you might feel like you are in a French restaurant.

Djibouti's Foreign Policy

JS: You mentioned that Djibouti is a gateway to Ethiopia, so I would like to know a bit about your foreign policy. Africa has a wide range of countries, with great diversity. Perhaps this diversity might be the reason why African countries have achieved regional alliances. This would seem to be expanding to the Indo-Pacific area today. How do you feel about these regional integration efforts in Africa and in the Indo-Pacific area?

Ali: This is a fundamental question because now the world is becoming more and more global and similar to a global village. Africa is very diverse; it has 54 countries with 100 spoken languages. As the world becomes more global and we share multilateralism with Japan in terms of reacting to climate change and so on, Africa is also trying to be organized at regional and continental levels. For example, my country is part of the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), a regional organization in East Africa established in 1996 for food security as well as the promotion of trade and military conflict mitigation, and of the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA) RTA in East-South Africa established in 1994. COMESA is a regional FTA in the area ranging from Egypt to Zimbabwe.

When we talk about regional integration, Djibouti and Ethiopia are perceived as a showcase. Ethiopia is the most populated country in Africa after Nigeria. For electricity, for example, Djibouti gets 40% of its power from Ethiopia (hydroelectricity). Neighboring countries are trying to work together to share experience and facilities and know-how, so we are now more and more trying to have these relations with our neighbors. Also with Japan and Asia. The Indo-Pacific idea is one of the opportunities that we want to seize because it is concerned with stability and peace and there is no development without peace. It can be used for the “blue” economy, which as you know is an economy that depends on the ocean. We need to get



experience from Japan, Singapore and India, because we are in the Indian Ocean.

Expectations of TICAD

JS: TICAD is a Japanese initiative. How do you perceive TICAD and what do you expect from TICAD VII, which will take place in Yokohama in August this year?

Ali: This is the most crucial initiative taken since 1993, a time when the rest of the world was not paying much attention to Africa. The Europeans were looking to Eastern Europe, and despite some newspapers claiming that Africa is a hopeless continent, Japan believes otherwise. It has adopted significant initiatives based on partnership and ownership. That is the singularity of ownership. Japan focuses on what we want, which is real ownership and partnership, as decided in 1993. Both Africans and Japanese are working closely on this issue. Since 1993, Djibouti has been an active participant in every summit, including this year's TICAD VII. We are expecting a lot from TICAD VII because Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and Foreign Minister Taro Kono have said that it will be based on business, and we want to attract the private sector of Japan to Djibouti, to the free zone. For me, it is one of the objectives to have the private sector of Japan at the trade fair that we will organize in December in Djibouti. Last year we got more than 40 Japanese SMEs. That is what we want this year also. We want to participate in side events and show that the private sector of Japan should be in Africa.

JS: You say it will be essential to attract the private sector. A bottom-up pyramid approach could attract SMEs and agriculture and small producers to Djibouti to help small industries. But how do you see this approach? Do you still want large companies to come to Djibouti?

Ali: Small companies in Japan are big companies in my country. So I do believe in this pyramid concept as big companies like Toyota and Mitsubishi are already in Africa distributing cars. It is the duty of both governments to bring SMEs into Africa. Djibouti can facilitate the process, while Japan can help provide a mechanism; small companies need to attenuate risk. If the risk is high, the profits are high. At the governmental level, there is a need to think about the mechanism of financing in order to facilitate the entry of these companies, and this would lead to sustainable development for African countries generally, and Djibouti in particular. This concept will allow the transfer of competence and capacity building, and will enhance the relations between the private sector in Japan and Djibouti. We already have the Japan-Djibouti Business Friendship Association here, and they have already opened a company in the enterprise zone in Djibouti. We want to provide them with land to use, where they can develop some industry. There are of course Turkish, French and Chinese companies but as ambassador of Djibouti to Japan my task is to realize this kind of initiative.

JS: Whatever kind of private sector business comes to Djibouti, human resources development would be a key issue to meet the needs of economic development in Djibouti or other African countries. How can you promote human resources development? Also, what is the significance of the ABE Initiative under the TICAD process for developing human resources?

Ali: The ABE Initiative is a vital issue initiative for human resources development. We need capacity building and transfer of competence, and through the ABE Initiative the students that come to Japan are facing a language barrier. So we are thinking about establishing Japanese language schools in Djibouti. The Americans, French and Chinese all have cultural societies such as the Confucius Institute in the Chinese case, but a Japanese presence is lacking. Many students are going to France and Malaysia but only a few to Japan due to the language barrier. It would be more efficient to have some language schools or departments in universities where we can teach the

Japanese language to empower students to come to Japan. Students do not usually stay in Japan; they come back home to Djibouti and can work for Japanese companies and can act as ambassadors for Japan. This initiative will continue under TICAD VII but needs to be consolidated by also taking some actions in the country .

JS: In the case of France, Alliance Francais is a very good language school. So something like that should be created in Japan as well.

Ali: The Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) has a lot of young volunteers and some of them speak French. The Djiboutian Embassy and JICA have been organizing some exchanges and holding trade fairs every December in Djibouti. Last year, some musicians came from Okinawa and Tokyo, and we had delegations from France and the US. This provides lots of opportunities to meet people from all over the world. I think that Alliance Francais is great, but even private schools could be created. One ABE Initiative student could go back to Djibouti with a young Japanese friend to open a language school, for example.

Partnership with Japanese Business

JS: Despite the language barrier, you are working on attracting Japanese businesses to Djibouti. Do you know any Japanese companies that have successfully made inroads in Djibouti?

Ali: Toyota has been present for a long time, and also Marubeni. We also have tourism-related companies and energy-related companies (especially solar). Toshiba is interested in geothermal energy production in Djibouti, and we have Kiyoshi Kimura, the owner of Japanese Sushi Restaurants called Sushizanmai, who is planning to open a restaurant. We also have the Tokushukai Group, a Japanese private hospital, working on hospital construction projects.

JS: Djibouti has enormous potential for tourism, so this might help to achieve business relations with Japan.

Ali: Tourism of course, and also the enterprise zone; our currency has been in parity with the US dollar since 1949 so it can be very attractive, and also there is no tax in the enterprise zone which is very attractive to Japanese companies.

JS: How do you expect Djibouti-Japan relations to develop?

Ali: I am very optimistic because we are sharing so many values with Japan. There is now a monument to celebrate the solidarity between Djibouti and Minamisoma. The young people who are in touch through this initiative will continue to develop important relations with Japan. The presence of the SDF in Djibouti is an example of our excellent relationship, which will continue to develop for both global interests and in the interests of the two countries.

Future Relations

JS: Finally, could you tell us what your plans are for promoting future development? Do you have any particular plans for contributing to this development?

Ali: We have the Djibouti-Japan Business Association, and at the same time we have the Djibouti-Japan Parliamentary Friendship Association. The presence of the SDF and other factors are helping to consolidate these existing relations, and we as Ethiopian Airlines are flying daily to Japan and are closer than ever before. In future we want to increase exchanges at all levels and continue to forge stronger links with each other by participating in conferences in each country and promoting various initiatives. We have signed MOUs with multiple universities, such as Hiroshima University and Kumamoto University, while there is one high school in Djibouti called Fukuzawa, named after the founder of Keio University, which has more than 10,000 students. So we hope to benefit from Japan's experience and know-how and transfer of capabilities, through JICA and other government agencies. We have some students in Kobe and also in southern Japan working on geothermal energy, and students are also coming from Japan to Djibouti.

JS: I didn't know that Djibouti was a country that attracted geologists and experts on solar power. Perhaps you could establish an exchange program between scientists?

Ali: We are doing this now with the Tokyo University of Agriculture and some other institutions. **JS**

Written with the cooperation of Joel Challender, who is a translator, interpreter, researcher and writer specializing in Japanese disaster preparedness.