

The African restitutions and their lessons

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Beyond Nigeria, several African countries have benefited from Swiss restitutions or freezes. Funds linked to Angola gave rise, in the mid-2000s, to a restitution earmarked for development projects, against a background marked by an arms-trafficking affair.¹ The assets of Laurent Gbagbo's entourage were frozen in 2011.² Tunisia has received, according to a recent analysis, only modest restitutions — some CHF 250,000 in 2016, EUR 3.5 million in 2017, 3.5 million dinars in 2021 — when set against the USD 13 billion at which the Tunisian confiscation commission valued the assets of the Ben Ali system.³

These experiences teach several things. The first is that restitution depends on the cooperation of the state of origin, whose institutions must be both able and willing to conduct the proceedings. The failure of the Mobutu case and the repeal of the Egyptian freeze bear witness to this. The second is that the use of restituted funds must be monitored, as the Abacha affair showed, which is what the model of the Bota Foundation, which managed in full independence the USD 115 million returned to Kazakhstan between 2008 and 2014, sought to guarantee.⁴ The third is that the amounts returned remain modest compared with the sums embezzled. Public Eye notes that Switzerland has returned some CHF 1.7 billion of the CHF 5 billion restituted internationally since the late 1990s, which places it in first position, but that this figure reveals above all that Swiss banks served as a refuge of first choice for dictators.⁵

The fourth lesson concerns prevention. Every restitution is the admission of an earlier failure: illicit assets were accepted by Swiss banks despite their due-diligence obligations. The Swiss Bankers Association points out that it is for the banks to carry out the required clarifications before entering into a relationship, and all the more so with politically exposed persons. Non-governmental organisations consider that this duty has not always been sufficiently observed.⁶ It emerged, in the wake of the Arab Spring, that

around CHF 1 billion had been deposited in Switzerland over ten years by the deposed Arab leaders, which raises questions about the vigilance exercised during that period.⁷

1 Notes

1. Restitution agreement of 2005 at the origin of the Angola–Switzerland Socio-Humanitarian Programme, managed by the Swiss embassy and the SDC (agricultural school, technical secondary school), followed by a second restitution agreement in 2012; Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, “Relations bilatérales Suisse–Angola” (Bilateral relations Switzerland–Angola), fdfa.admin.ch (accessed September 2026). ↩
2. Public Eye, “Avoirs illicites” (Illicit assets), cited above, which mentions the freezing of the Gbagbo clan’s assets in 2011. ↩
3. “Biens volés, restitutions gelées : pourquoi l’Europe garde encore l’argent des anciens régimes africains” (Stolen goods, frozen restitutions: why Europe still holds the money of former African regimes), [Afrik.com](https://afrik.com), 7 April 2026. ↩
4. “Notre politique de restitution sert aussi bien nos valeurs que nos intérêts” (Our restitution policy serves our values as much as our interests), interview with Pascale Baeriswyl, swissinfo.ch (accessed September 2026). ↩
5. Public Eye, “Avoirs illicites”, cited above. ↩
6. “Loi modèle pour la restitution des fonds de dictateurs” (Model law for the restitution of dictators’ funds), swissinfo.ch, cited above. ↩
7. “Loi modèle pour la restitution des fonds de dictateurs”, swissinfo.ch, cited above. ↩

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