

FPC Briefing

African political unity must be more selective: A blueprint for change

by William Gumede

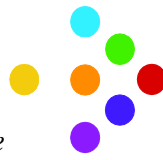
Introduction

There cannot be any clearer illustration of the impotence of Africa's continental and regional institutions to find local solutions to the continent's problems, than their numbing inaction in the face of the wave of popular rebellions against dictators in North Africa sweeping across the continent.

African continental and regional institutions were conspicuously silent when popular rebellions kicked out autocratic leaders in Tunisia and Egypt. They have been equally clueless in dealing with the crisis in Libya where people are rebelling against their ruler, Colonel Muammar Gaddafi – and he is fighting back violently. The AU mission to Libya was a massive failure.

In the absence of leadership from Africans, the UN and traditional big powers stepped into try to resolve the Libyan and other African crises. African institutions and leaders also spectacularly failed to deal with the crisis in the Côte d'Ivoire, where former strongman Laurent Gbagbo refused to step down after losing presidential elections to Alassane Ouattara. Again, the failure of African leaders and continental institutions in the Côte d'Ivoire crisis meant that former colonial power, France, at crucial points played a key role in mobilising international pressure on Gbagbo to step down.

Africa's sub-regional institutions have been equally impotent. The Economic Community of West African States (Ecowas) had one emergency meeting after another, but got nowhere close to resolving the Côte d'Ivoire crisis. The Southern African Development Community (SADC) has yet to stop Zimbabwean autocrat Robert Mugabe's tyranny against its people. In fact, during crucial moments, SADC and regional leaders have actually reinforced Mugabe's power. Similarly, in Swaziland, King Mswati, has battered his people, but still receives the red-carpet treatment by SADC. The AU of course has not done any better in both Zimbabwe and Swaziland.



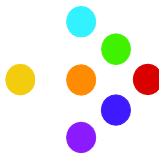
The AU, the home-grown continental structure set up to offer African solutions for local problems, has failed spectacularly in lots of other African hotspots too. It has fallen far short in trying to broker an end to bloody conflict in the Darfur region of Sudan. It did not come to grips with the crippling food shortages, fuel and inflation plaguing the continent, which is at least in part due to bad local leadership, mismanagement and lack of democracy. A common response to other common regional problems, such as the HIV&Aids crisis, or a common response to the devastating impact of the global financial crisis has been lacking. Not surprisingly, African countries worst hit by food shortages – including Zimbabwe, Egypt, Cameroon, Gabon, Ethiopia - are also among those governed the most autocratically, and where the AU's silent has been most deafening.

For all the rhetoric of 'African unity', AU member states have rarely voted together in international fora to safeguard common African interests. The 'unity' record of regional institutions such as SADC and ECOWAS are similarly compromised. Individual African countries are usually often bought off by big and former colonial powers. Continental and regional institutions have had no uniform mutually beneficial policy towards interacting with outside powers. The only unity had often been of Africa gangs of dictators clubbing together behind the AU, SADC or Ecowas, to shield each other against criticisms by ordinary Africans, civil groups and outsiders when battering their citizens.

For example, China picks and chooses its policies for different AU member states – buying off individual leaders, to prevent a united African response. Africa has been divided on how to respond to the European Union's economy undermining Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs), with some countries rejecting it and others embracing it. EPAs force African countries not to trade with countries or regions competing with the EU. A common response from African continental and regional institutions would have made it difficult for the EU to punish those refusing to sign up and prevented them from playing African countries off against each other.

Africa's prosperity depends on tighter political, trade and economic integration

It is now a truism that Africa's prosperity in an increasingly uncertain, complex and rapidly changing world depends on even closer political, economic and trade integration between countries. Africa's future prosperity still lies in individual countries on the continent, pooling their markets, development efforts and attempts to seriously build democracy. African

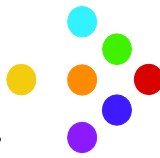


countries now desperately need the stability, security and the independence to make policies freely that only a continental 'pooling of resources and cooperation', can provide. African countries will have to come up with common strategies to leverage for example China and other emerging markets' increased trade and investment interests in Africa.

The current leadership of regional and continental institutions are too discredited, the institutions too toothless and the rules for membership too lenient. *The solution is to radically overhaul continental and regional institutions.* In order to reverse this dispiriting situation, African countries will have to bring new energy, ideas and leaders to make regional and continental institutions work. Furthermore, we need new objectives and new concepts appropriate and even new words that are appropriate for our times. The ways in which many African leaders and institutions generally think about closer integration is outdated. The idea of pan-Africanism in which all African countries will join into a happy family is unworkable, unachievable and simply silly. To continue with these ideas will mean that Africa is unlikely to reach its full potential in this generation and become as prosperous as say the East Asian tigers.

The current wave of rebellions against dictators that started in North Africa, the global financial crisis, and the rise of emerging countries such as China, Brazil and India, which is likely to remake the world, offers a *critical juncture* for African countries to pursue comprehensive going reforms of continental and regional institutions. In fact, given the rupture that the global financial crisis is causing to nations, the continent may end up poorer, unless it changes direction.

African political unity must be selective. The basis of a revamped African Union must start with a small group of countries that should club together who can pass a double 'stress' test based on quality of a democracy and the prudence of their economic governance. When the final decision was made on the structure of the AU in 2001, there were two options on the table to determine membership criteria: one option argued for selective membership based on meeting certain democratic and development criteria. The second option argued for all African countries to be members, regardless of whether they are led by dictators. This



latter option was pushed by some of Africa's 'big men' led countries, including Libya's Gaddafi and Zimbabwe's Mugabe¹. Clearly, this was a lost opportunity.

The AU has in fact, no minimum entry requirements, whether in terms of the quality of democracy or the prudence of a country's economic management. Because membership of the AU is largely voluntary, countries like Zimbabwe, could still be members even if their governments have appalling human rights records, and spectacularly mismanage their countries' economics and politics. This means that Zimbabwe and all the rogue regimes in Africa can all be fully-fledged voting members, determining the outcomes of crucial decisions of the organisation.

Make membership of AU more selective

In fact, the AU should start as a three-track system, a core group of countries that meets the minimum democratic and economic governance criteria, and a second track of countries who did not make the cut in democratic and economic management terms, but which are serious to pursue the new objectives of the AU. The rest, the third group of countries, would be the assortment of dictatorships – which should be shunned, until they introduce democratic governance. The second track countries should then be assessed on an annual basis to see whether they are ready yet to enter the first track of countries.

By compelling members to follow a set of good economic and social policies, the citizens of African countries who are outside the AU – perhaps because their leaders refuse to adhere to minimum good governance rules - will also have a clear set of standards against which they can measure their governments' performance. Citizens of non-member countries would also be able to use to compulsory AU good governance criteria to put pressure on their governments to deliver. This will also energise many African nations as their citizens would be able to measure their governments' performance – whether members of the AU or not - against credible new continental-wide good governance norms.

¹ The leaders of the group ran a campaign suggesting South Africa was influenced by the West, therefore, its proposal to make the AU more EU-like in its selectivity. Mbeki himself was under attack at the time by old guard African leaders who alleged that he was under the influence of the West. This damaged his reputation among fellow African peers. Since then, Mbeki went all out to appear more African than other leaders, even to the extent of not criticising Zimbabwe's Robert Mugabe for his human rights abuses in his country, lest he was tagged as parroting the West.



Of course, there are not many African countries that will right now pass such a test. Stricter rules will mean that the AU will start off initially as a small club of countries. At best perhaps only South Africa, Mauritius, Botswana, Cape Verde, Namibia – and then if the criteria are in some cases flexibly applied! Nevertheless, the countries pass the test for acceptance into the elite tier should harmonize economic policies, foreign and democratic governance. These top-tier African countries could be the core of the first African-wide set of industrial policies and long-term economic development strategy aimed to lift African countries up the industrial value chain.

Every country then set democratic and developmental targets, say for five years. Every member of the AU can draw up a developmental plan, in consultation with the AU. At the heart of these developmental plans must be for African countries to diversify, from raw materials to beneficiated products. As former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan rightly said recently Africa is overlying on unprocessed commodities along with insufficient investment in manufactures and infrastructure; and this old pattern is being replicated in its trade with new emerging partners, such as China and India, which is unlikely to translate into widespread job-creation, poverty reduction and economic prosperity.

The AU will then monitor the implementation of these plans to ensure they are met. The movement between these countries of skills, people and goods could be eased. Countries which adhere to these democratic and economic management criteria could be rewarded with new investments, development projects and support, and those not, excluded, until they improve. Special Africa investment funds could be set up, for example pooling the proceeds from commodities, to finance social and physical infrastructure across the continent. Proceeds from such funds would then be distributed on the basis of the level or willingness of nations to reform economies and democracies. This fund can then be use for targeted development in underdeveloped areas of the countries that make the criteria.

It is not that countries that fall in the poorest governed groups should be sidelined. Funds, resources and support could be given to them, based on strict criteria of adherence to democratic and prudent economic governance rules. The AU of core countries will then adopt joint positions on foreign policy, and will act as a bloc in multilateral organisations, international treaties, and on common issues, such as the climate change. The AU can also directly negotiate with say China when trade deals are struck to come up with the most



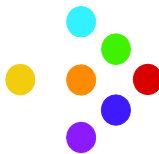
beneficial trade deals for individual countries. The AU will then negotiate as a trade bloc beneficial trade agreements for African countries. A core, standing African peacekeeping force could be set up from members of the core group, and those of the second group, through the principle of 'flexible' union.

Secondly, the second group of African countries which do not meet the minimum democratic and economic governance criteria, but which are genuinely on their way to meet these requirements, would then be set targets to reach before they are allowed into the elite group. Achievement of these targets would then be rewarded with increased investment. The third group of African countries which have very minimum levels of democratic governance and prudent economic management would also be set targets, with deadlines to meet at least the requirements to be allowed into the second tier nations.

The fourth group of African countries would be those who are typically undemocratic and badly governed economically, with clearly no immediate prospects of improvement. Those countries scoring badly – and showing unwillingness to reform, should be sidelined until they shape up. The first tier countries would then offer citizens of the African nations where democratic and economic governance fall short, continental examples to aspire to.

Focus on rights of citizens, rather than state security

The sub-regional African institutions, SADC, Comesa and EAC (East Africa Community) must all be collapsed to make way for a revamped AU a continental-wide common market and Africa free trade area. Africa can escape the high tariffs in industrial countries by instead of exporting products to these industrial countries they can export to other African countries that do not produce such products. Of course it is right for African countries to call for an overhaul of the unfair trade barriers imposed by industrial countries. The reality is there this not going to happen. The difficulties that industrial nations now experience because of the global financial crisis, means that these countries are likely to become more protectionist, rather than less. This means that African countries will have to go beyond just complaining – because it will lead nowhere. A better strategy would be for African countries to trade smarter within, and with new trading partners among emerging markets. For example, Africa's manufactures and services may be uncompetitive in relations to industrial nations, but it can be traded with other African countries.



Continental and regional institutions peace and security policies have, like under the Organisation of African Unity (OAU), at their focus state security, rather than human security. This wrong-headed principle is at the heart of African peers shielding despots such as Zimbabwe's Robert Mugabe from criticisms, rather than coming to the aid of their desperate citizens. For the OAU, African presidents were more important than the continent's people. This has remained unchanged under the new AU and regional institutions. Another obstructive rule has been that African leaders always side with the fellow African leaders, when they are criticised by the West, especially former colonial powers, no matter the merits of the criticisms.

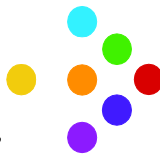
Furthermore, fellow African movements always close ranks when another is criticised by outsiders – must be broken. African solidarity must not be based on leaders, but on values, such as democracy, social justice, clean government, ethnic inclusiveness and peace, protecting ordinary Africans, against disease, violence and hunger, and prudently managing economies for the benefit of the continent's people. African countries will need to cede some of their sovereignty. The AU's Charter will have to be changed from protecting the sovereignty of individual countries to protecting the security of Africans themselves. The African principle of non-interference in the affairs of neighbours still partially informs the AU which has been very reluctant to intervene forcefully in misgoverned nations.

A combination of social and economic integration caused by globalization's adjuncts of migration, urbanization, and the free flow of information, means borders are increasingly meaningless². There are no 'national' crises in Africa anymore: a crisis in one African country will quickly turn into a crisis in the whole region, affecting the whole continent³. Zimbabwe's problems are South African – as the three million destitute Zimbabwean emigrants fleeing chaos in their country to South Africa is attesting to. Similarly, in East Africa – if Kenya catches a fever, so too does Uganda, Tanzania, Rwanda, Burundi and Congo⁴.

² Githongo, J. and Gumedde, W. 2008. Let the African Union set democratic standards. The Financial Times. July 1.

³ This is clearly illustrated by the fact that a crisis says in Zimbabwe or Sudan clouds investor perceptions of the whole of Africa. Outsiders often lump a crisis in one country as affecting the whole continent. This problem has been further illustrated by South Africa's efforts in the mid-1990s to sell itself as a stable country separate from other African crises ridden countries. This has not been very successful, as Afro-pessimism in the West lump any political or economic problem in South Africa, however minor, as a general affliction of all of Africa. Botswana, one of Africa's most consistently prudently managed economies and democracy, has often suffered the same fate.

⁴ Githongo, J. and Gumedde, W. 2008. Let the African Union set democratic standards. The Financial Times. July 1.

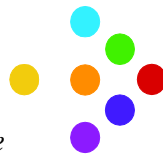


There is not much provision for ordinary African citizens to have direct influence on AU and regional institutions' decisions. AU, regional institutions and African leaders were themselves very reluctant to have civil society, let alone their voting citizens to scrutinise their institutions and plans. So far, continental and regional institutions are glorified clubs of leadership chums, mostly dictators for that matter. Referenda could be introduced whereby ordinary citizens, electorates and civil groups vote on crucial policies of continental and regional institutions.

A revamped AU and regional institutions could play important roles in constructing a new democratic political culture across the continent's . Importantly, the fact that most African countries are so ethnically, lingually and culturally diverse means that democracy and inclusive development must be the glue of any nation-building process. Many African countries have still not reformed limited democratic institutions, restrictive laws and official powers inherited from colonial days to more relevant ones. In many other countries where democratic institutions, such as parliaments and human rights commissions, have been set up, these are often in name only. In fact democratic political cultures are absent in many countries.

Part of the revamp of continental and regional institutions must be real, effective pan-African institutions, such as a continent-wide Supreme Court and a Constitutional Court. These courts should be independent and have jurisdiction over prescribed areas in member states, so that when tyrants like Mugabe emerge, they can no longer depend on the acquiescence or support of fellow rogues whose records are not much better or even worse. Member countries of revamped AU and regional institutions will also have to establish credible democratic institutions: independent judiciary, electoral commissions and human rights bodies.

The first task of revamped continental and regional institutions must be to compel all its members to scrap all repressive laws. Most African countries, just like Zimbabwe, have 'insult laws' that outlaws criticisms of the president – the second leader of Zimbabwe's opposition Movement for Democratic Change, Tendai Biti, was prosecuted under these laws. Yet, the AU does not demand its members to repeal such oppressive laws. A citizen from a member country must have recourse to the AU, if that citizen is brutalised by his or her government. Gender equality must be the basis of all business of the AU. Every member



country will have to adhere to two-limits for presidencies. There will have to be a transparent procedure to impeach presidents or leaders who start off as democrats, but turn into tyrants, so that we do not repeat having the likes of Mugabe, again.

Political parties in AU member countries getting state funding should adhere to minimum internal democratic rules, this will prevent one-man parties, and tribal parties. The AU must also set new minimum standards of conduct and operation for ruling and opposition parties in Africa in members countries, most of them are too undemocratic, corrupt, and tribally based - to lead the continent to a new era of quality democracy and prudent economic management.

Conclusion: African integration project must be genuinely democratic

Africa's urgently needs an 'inclusive and forward-looking' democratic and economic development project, beyond the lacklustre, superficial and unserious ones offered now. Political and economic development integration on a continental level, if done seriously, may perhaps be that forward-looking project that will lift Africa out of decline. But the African integration project must be genuinely democratic, giving ordinary citizens a real say in its decisions, which will ultimately impact on their lives. The debate of the future of the continent must not be limited to leaders or the elite – as is the case currently.

Post-independence Pan Africanism failed to secure a sense of ownership of the African integration projects. Its proponents steered it in a top down, leadership focused, exclusive and non-participative direction rather than bottom-up, ordinary citizen, inclusive and participative manner. The current efforts of the AU and regional institutions are very much in danger of falling on the same sword as the failed post-independence integration project. Beyond leaders and the elite, there is no genuine African-wide debate about the future of the continent. Continental and regional institutions must now urgently be reformed, to close the continent's gaping democracy gap, move it to the next level of democratic building and consolidate, to ensure enduring stability and equitable growth.

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