Salient Features of the 18th African Union Summit:

Generational Progression of Democracy in Africa

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The 18th African Union Summit was held from 23-30 January 2012 in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. The AU 2012 January Summit was different from the

previous summits for various reasons. In recent years, Africa has shown a marked progress in terms of conducting internationally accepted elections, however, it has also faced serious challenges in the management of elections. With three dictators already toppled by the North African Uprisings and four democratically elected new leaders from Tunisia, Zambia, Liberia, and Nigeria, the composition of the AU Assembly of Heads of State and Government exhibits the generational increase in Africa's democratic profile. Although there are some dictators that remain in power after more than 20 years, and other leaders with contested mandate and diminished legitimacy due to election-

related violence e.g., Kenya, Nigeria, Cote d'Ivoire, it is clear that Africa has witnessed what one may call 'generational progression of democracy'. Each decade, the numbers of democratically elected leaders of Africa have increased. Compared to the 1990s and early 2000s, 2010 exhibited a striking surge in the number of democratically elected leaders participating in the AU Summit.

Africa has made 'generational progression of democracy' that is attributable to the increase in holding democratic elections in Africa. As a result, the surge in the democratic profile of the AU Assembly of the Heads of State is expected to increase in the coming years. Africa is displaying a more accelerated electoral democratic consolidation than in the previous decades as various governance indexes and election observation missions have suggested. 2011 has been dubbed as a 'year of elections' because there were more than 20 elections including in Tunisia, Nigeria, Benin, Liberia, Guinea, Niger, Cote d' Ivoire, South Africa, Zambia, South Sudan and Somaliland. Most of these elections were considered an improvement by the international community. Many African countries including Ghana, Algeria, Egypt, Libya, will hold local, parliamentary and presidential elections in 2012.

The 1960s was marked by the wave of decolonization, and the 1970s was known for one-party dominance of the newly independent African states. These one-party states metamorphosed to one-man rule, which took decades to introduce some cosmetic reforms and ideas of governance based on constitutions. In the 1980s, many of these one-man governments of Africa began to give lip-service to constitutionalism and began constitution-making. However, with the end of the Cold War in the 1990s,

many African governments were forced to face the reality of a unipolar (US-dominated) world order, unlike the bipolar (Soviet-American international dominance) of the 1980s. The talk of human rights and the rise of democratic values in the global agenda, compelled African governments to provide space for human rights and political participation of parties notwithstanding with varying degrees of freedom and political space. Governments realized that the old way of governance by open extermination of opponents and oppression of the public at large was over. Since the beginning of 2000, African governments introduced the concept of multi-party elections. This opening of political space was viewed as source of legitimacy in the eyes of the international community. When the parties in power were seriously challenged, manipulation (when possible) and intimidation (if necessary) were employed as tools of control.

The North African Uprisings constitute another factor for the surge in the

democratic profile of the AU Summit. Former long-serving dictators – Ben Ali of Tunisia, Hosni Mubarak of Egypt, and Muammer Qaddafi of Libya – are out of the political landscape of the AU. Even if it is difficult to predict the future of Egypt and Libya, the Tunisian election signals a bright start. Yet, the fate of democratization in

North Africa, particularly in Egypt, remains uncertain as the role of the military will be determined by the results of the elections in November and the number of seats the Muslim Brotherhood wins. As far as economic patronage – the Egyptian military and Libyan revolutionaries, as well as the interest of the Western world are at risk. Democratization will equally face serious constraints.

The North African revolutions are what the mathematicians call 'markers of change' for the rest of the continent and elsewhere. The message is that African governments that refuse to meet public requests for evolutionary reform have to deal with widespread protests in favour of revolutionary regime change. For African leaders, the most important message is that lifetime presidency is over and constitutional terms of power are long enough to make the necessary good impact on a given society if used properly.

Another vital message from the North African revolutions is the rise of popular leadership and the end of the dichotomy between performance leader and popular leader. While performance leader's legitimacy stems from delivery of services, goods and social stability including economic growth, for popular leadership the locus of legitimacy to rule depends on the popular mandate one enjoys. Since legitimacy, like a fund, dwindles over time, it needs to be replenished through better performance and regular elections and mandates from the public. In order to enjoy legitimacy, a leader has to be both a superb performer and highly popular. More than anything else, the North African revolutions have shown that the old dichotomy between freedom from hunger and freedom from fear is over. Both are priorities for citizens of

Africa. The old argument that dictates 'bread today, freedom tomorrow' is changing to 'both bread and freedom today'. Therefore, African leaders need to abandon banking their legitimacy to rule only on performing economically well, they need to seek the popular legitimacy from the public.

While the universal contagiousness of the North African revolution will be determined by the contextual peculiarities of each country, such specificity will be dependent on the popularity current leaders enjoy, the legitimacy (pockets of legitimacy sources) of government, and above all the public belief in the possibility of regime change without resorting to revolution or uprising. Thus, the most enduring and key message of these uprisings is that populations will revolt to end tyranny, and that governments have to enjoy widespread legitimacy or continuously face protests. More importantly, the uprisings indicate that no matter how much a dictator manipulates a political system or intimidates the public by brute force, unforeseen circumstances may lead to a situation where the public protest reaches a point of no return. Time is of the essence at this point.

For the African Union and its Regional Economic Communities (RECs) too, the uprisings have produced significant lessons. Their normative frameworks need to be interpreted creatively to support such widespread popular protests when the causes of such protests are legitimate. The AU institutional setup needs to be nimble and firm by avoiding unnecessary bureaucratic processes that characterize their sluggish culture of responding to events. The AU member states will not willingly and always bestow the AU with the authority to exercise some of its mandates as provided under the constitutive legal instruments. While

conferring robust mandate of intervention on paper, they will always be reluctant to do so in practice. Indeed, the AU and its organs

need to robustly exercise mandates that are conferred on them. In some historical instances like the North African Uprisings, they need to exercise authority by creatively construing and expanding their already existing mandate. Such an approach ought to apply to all AU organs, particularly the most active ones such as the Peace and Security Council, the AU Commission and the Assembly.

The implications of these uprisings for Africa are enormous. Development partners and aid organizations (such as the UN and its agencies, the World Bank, EU and the USA and their national aid agencies as well as international development organizations) need to examine their policies. Such introspective investigation would help to revise their assumption and enable them to design new approaches. In the historical context they may be considered as 'the fourth wave of democratization' in terms of the collective message they carry, and their impact on policies of major actors at

national and international levels. Samuel Huntington pointed to the end of the democratic wave in his book 'Third Wave of Democratization', and prescribed that some countries in Africa ought to prioritize stability over democracy.[1] This theory of Huntington seems to have been disproved by the North African revolutions. North African countries were considered, (by many development partners) as insulated from disturbances of the kind many Sub-Saharan countries are now facing. The development partners measured the performance of these countries by statistics in the development index, economic growth or doing business index. Foreign policies of major global powers such as the US, EU member states, China and Russia were also dictated by perceptions that the regimes of North African countries played pivotal roles in the fight against terrorism. The production of oil or the corporate interests of Western countries have also influenced such perceptions of stability.

One area of action for the new leadership of the AU Commission should be to introduce a *Moratorium on Norm-setting*. Since its establishment, the AU has been mainly focused on policy formulation and to some extent, on norm-diffusion by way of popularization and dissemination of policies and conventions. Consequently, the AU has more than 200 well-advanced legislative and policy frameworks on several issues including on democratic constitutional governance. These include 41 treaties and conventions of which 16 did not yet secure 15 ratifications.[2] In some conventions such

as those dealing with refugees and internally displaced persons, the AU has taken a lead in norm setting business. Currently, the most binding constraint in the AU system is the gap between the norms set in treaties and policies on the one hand, and their implementation on the other hand. It is for this reason that implementation of the existing legal and policy frameworks should take priority. Now, after ten years of its establishment, it is high time for the AU and all its organs to advance towards the norm-implementation phase of existing treaties and policies. The AU needs to put the majority of its resources on mechanisms of implementation of treaties and policies, and supervision.

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18th African Union Summit image:
http://in2eastafrica.net/wp-content/uploads/2012/02/18th-African-Union-summit.jpg

North African Uprising image:
http://www.talkafrique.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/02/protests.jpg

AU logo:
http://au.int/en/sites/default/files/u1/LOGO-%20printing.jpg

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[1] Samuel Huntington (1991) *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century*, University of Oklahoma Press, Norman and London.
[2]List of countries that have signed, ratified/acceded to the different treaties of the AU, 2010, available from **http://www.au.int/en/treaties/status** (accessed on 10 July 2011).

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