

The African Union at another crossroad

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After a six-month long political and diplomatic impasse – i.e., not counting the time spent on official as well as possible behind-the-scene lobbying and negotiations leading to the January meeting – the bid to find the next chairperson for the African Union Commission (AUC) is finally over. It happened on July 15, 2012, during the 19th Session of the African Union (AU) Assembly held in Addis Ababa. The winner of the contest is the former South African Home Affairs Minister and ex-wife of incumbent President Jacob Zuma of the same country – Mrs Dlamini Zuma, who



replaced Dr Jean Ping to run the continental organization for the next few years. Back in January, neither contestant had been able to get the minimum two-thirds majority, causing in the process, the postponement which some critics say was in violation of the AU's own election regulation.

Tarnishing Africa's evolving image borne out of its most recent success stories, both economically and to a certain extent even politically, is the unexpected emergence of controversies around the last two AU summits. The 18th Summit, as we remember, hosted a stream of remarks of which some were utterly malicious and dishonest, and directed towards the AU, its new headquarters building, its donor, China, some individual African countries and even high-profile personalities. The central issue of the critique was that the African Union had gone out of its moral limits to accept a gift of dubious nature from China in the form of a new headquarters building in Addis Ababa. We have dwelt on this subject



in some depth over the last few months, and it is not necessary to discuss it here any longer. And yet, all of us have to remember at this juncture that the issue had barely been off the air and the rubble it aroused properly settled, when another problem fell off the hook. It came in the form of an election process – a process that, as far as at least distant onlookers were concerned, began to manifest some of the traits of derailment that is often witnessed in parts of Africa during national political elections.

That these and other similar crises come and go within the auspices of the AU in such frequency, speaks less of the severity of the problem than the multiplicity and diversity of the human factors ensnared in the controversy. State and government leaders of member countries, prominent politicians and personalities, diplomats as well as journalists, found themselves inside an entanglement whose resolution threatened to be difficult within a given time frame. That is because with people of such diverse background and proclivity in attendance come inevitably polarized views, conflicting interests, irreconcilable alliances, and the like. In fact, to some critics who claimed to have closely watched the goings-on within the AU premises or the much broader regional and continental context, the recent election crisis represented a problem much larger in scope and consequence than one that would have occurred between two prominent citizens who wanted to be at the helm of an international organization. That is, as far as they were concerned, it would be naïve to explain whatever had been happening was based exclusively on certain loose assumptions such as one's patriotic feeling toward Africa and Africans, or serving some sacred purpose on their behalf.

An attempt to determine whether or not this judgement was true is not important for many of us, though this decision of ours may understandably damage the feelings of those concerned. Readers have to know, however, that if it is true that there are other hidden interests besides serving Africa (and there is an equal chance for it to be true)

there will be more at stake for the continent and its peoples than hurt feelings of the two past contenders in the event that it is not true. In any event, since no one can deny the versatile nature of mankind, no one in all sincerity can scorn the aspiration of a candidate for the chairmanship of the AU Commission to play a political role. And, to say the least, the AU is first and foremost, a political organization. Being a political organization means, at least theoretically, to unify the political interests of member-states, and to benefit politically vis-à-vis states outside of the continent. It goes without saying, therefore, that the logical determinant of effective chairpersonship at the AUC is proven political ability, most certainly demonstrated at senior national ministerial level. No wonder that the current Chairperson, as well as her predecessors, (including those who headed the AU's forerunner, the Organization of the African Union (OAU)), were excellent statespersons in their respective countries.

Nevertheless, playing an effective political role is only part of the story. From inception as a Pan-African concept to its objective birth and growth as the Organization of African Unity (OAU), and to its evolved form in which it is now, the African Union, is supposed to be a union of all African nations and peoples in all its aspects i.e., political, economic, social, cultural, linguistic and so on. (This writer would like to include in the list as many others certainly do, the union of hearts and minds of all Africans). In fact, the consensus is that a complete political union, though sought as a

primary objective in the beginning by some of our founding fathers and is still sought dearly these days, will happen as a culmination of all the unifying phases. In short, it is currently nothing more than a vision. No doubt the European Union (EU) is the working model, though not an entirely perfect one, because, alas, Africa now is not what Europe was a few decades ago.

Shortening the transition period and bringing Africa closer to where Europe is now, is the whole issue of this article. Here lies the cause for the despair of some critics who expect more from member countries and the nominees they send to compete and fill the various positions at the AUC, than their squabbles at election time and their inactivity once they are in office. It is difficult to deny – nor is there the cynic’s pleasure to do so – that Africa has fared very well over the last decade in all aspects, and that the credit goes to the last Chairperson, Dr Jean Ping, as well as his commissioners,



for these successes scored at AU level. This writer differs in many ways from those who blindly or deliberately pour ice-cold water on the magnificent jobs done within his term of office, for I have had the opportunity to

see everything from up close at the AU as a short-term consultant in one of its programmes. Anyone who has a similar experience cannot help but contend that much of the dark criticism slung at Dr Ping or at the continental organization had actually sprung from long-standing, unholy motives and attitudes that have in focus Africa in general.

Even so, the African Union has yet to be recognized by all of us Africans, as too sacred a ground for disputations other than those that are inviolably good for the continent, and open for negotiation and peaceful resolution. This recognition must begin with the heads of state and government, and filter down to every ordinary citizen. We owe it to our forefathers who set up the ideals of unity within the framework of a giant continent we call Africa – a continent that has had all the natural and human resources, all but peace and stability to make use of them. Peace and stability is now well above the horizon, clearly visible and encouraging to all those who can see that Africa is on its way to wield irresistible power. It is Tupac Shakur’s song this time – *“All eyes on me!”*

Now, what then is the role of the Chairperson of the African Union Commission, Dr Dlamini Zuma, in the current circumstances? For one thing (and speaking bluntly as a one-time insider) the Chairperson and her commissioners should reach out to key players, namely the multitude of experts, mainly from Africa, but including expatriates who mean to, and

really do evoke real changes to the continent and its peoples. This begins with implementing the mass of papers on conventions, decisions, resolutions, declarations, agreements and what not, all of which are already in the hands of the experts who don't know what to do with them, and are thus frustrated. In one AU-related workshop, this writer came across a memorable remark, namely that the AUC has enough of these recommendations to work with for several decades whilst going at a faster pace than it currently does, and this was not said as a joke. Even critical decisions with far-reaching implications to the peace, security, development and integration of the continent – every one a key objective of the successive strategic plans of the AU – have taken years to mature above their inception and are still struggling to see the light of day. One good, but by no means the only example, is the African Union Border Programme. It was declared in 2007, and has yet to go some significant distance in-house, at AUC HQ, before it is implemented farther a-field. Upon implementation, its significance will have no limit to African border issues such as the borders between neighbouring countries, 75 per cent of which are not demarcated; human, weapons and drug trafficking; illegal migration; money laundering; and counter-terrorism.

This suggestion is not intended to downplay the role the AUC Chairperson and the commissioners have played. Dr Dlamini Zuma has promised upon taking office, *“to discharge this responsibility by working*

with all member states and the talent that exists in our continent”. It is reasonable to think that this is, after all, what really matters. That an AUC chairperson is charged with the responsibility to see the AUC function effectively; that he or she is accountable to all member-states no matter which region on the African continent they technically belong to; and that it is the talents of the experts he or she should use to deliver results. This is the only way that the huge backlog of unfinished and/or neglected jobs will enjoy a second chance in the advancement of the interests of the African peoples. Otherwise, history will only repeat itself, and we will be back to square one, thus telling the same story all over again.

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Mrs. Dlamini Zuma AU image:

<http://afrikangoddessmag.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/Nkosazana-Dlamini-Zuma.jpg>

AU HQ image:

<http://danielberhane.files.wordpress.com/2012/02/headquarters-of-the-african-union-addis-ababa-ethiopia.jpg>

Dr. Jean Ping image: <http://www.theafricanworld.tv/wp-content/uploads/2011/12/Dr-Jean-Ping.jpg>