

From OAU to AU: turning a page in the history of Africa

On 9 July, 43 African leaders gathered in Durban, South Africa, to dissolve the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) and transform it into the African Union (AU). While the scope of the OAU was to fight colonialism and apartheid, the aim of the AU is to unify its 53 member states politically, socially and economically, and attract foreign aid and investment through the promotion of democracy, human rights and good governance.

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When in 1963 a few African leaders met in Addis Ababa to found the OAU, they believed that in order to liberate the continent from colonialism and racism they had to be united. Over the years, the OAU helped foster solidarity among the newly independent states and preserve the idea of sovereign borders. However, weighed down with debts and bureaucracy, and as a consequence of its policy of non-interference in the internal affairs of sovereign states, the OAU failed to prevent conflicts, stop genocides or challenge dictators.

When forty-three leaders met in Durban in July 2002, they understood that the African Union could not become “another toothless bulldog as its predecessor”. In his opening speech the President of South Africa, Thabo Mbeki, who was appointed as the first chairman of the Union, said that people must deepen the culture of collective action and develop new levels of partnership. He also emphasized how democracy, good governance and respect for human rights are necessary pre-requisites for development.

African economies need to be revitalised to meet the challenges of the global economy. Africa can no longer be simply an exporter of raw materials, but needs to produce high quality goods for its own use and for export. Member states thus need to increase trade among themselves. Regional integration can help, but SADC, COMESA,

ECOWAS, the Magreb Community, and the East African Community have not yet delivered significant benefits. In addition, too often private capital flees to safer markets in Europe and the USA, denying Africa the resources necessary for any hope of economic integration.

With or without strings?

In the short term, Africa needs aid and foreign investment. One of the major points of discussion in Durban was the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD)¹. In the past few years, the Presidents of South Africa, Senegal, and Nigeria have insisted that sovereignty can no longer be used to hide misconduct. Then, they made several trips to the West to fight for debt relief, increased access for African goods to Western markets and to convince the most developed countries that Africa is stable enough to attract more aid and foreign investment. They promised that a peer review committee would ensure that members comply with standards of good governance and fiscal responsibility. And in fact, one month before the launch of the AU, at the G8 summit in Canada, an “African action plan” of \$6 billion was announced. For Mbeki and President Obasanjo of Nigeria, NEPAD was thus meant to play a key role in the new African Union.

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◀ Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo (right) with outgoing Organisation of African Unity (OAU) chairman Zambian President Levy Mwanawasa (left), new African Union Chairman South African President Thabo Mbeki (2nd from left) and OAU Secretary general Mali's Amara Essy in Durban 8 July 2002 at the final summit of the organisation

Former South African President Nelson Mandela is greeted by Zambian President Levy Mwanawasa (centre) the outgoing Organisation of African Unity (OAU) chairman and South African President Thabo Mbeki (2nd from right) in Durban, 8 July 2002 ▶

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Some other African leaders claimed that any programme concerning Africa should be owned and driven by Africans. They argued that initiatives such as NEPAD could put Africa's needs at the whim of the West. Colonel Gaddafi was the foremost spokesperson for these concerns. By trying to counterbalance the role of Mbeki and Obasanjo, Gaddafi provided an alternative vision for the AU, which he saw as a shield against Western imperialism. In his speech he urged African leaders to be proud of themselves and reject strings on foreign aid. "We accept help, but we refuse conditions. We are not pupils who need someone to teach us". After his failures with the Arab League, Gaddafi turned his attention to the AU project, hoping to expand his leadership in the region. He even envisaged becoming the first president of the United States of Africa and hoped to establish the headquarters of the AU in Sirte (Libya). Sirte is the city where, in the first week of September 1999, African leaders convened for an extraordinary session of the OAU. The Sirte Declaration became the Constitutive Act that is now to govern the Union.

A renewed commitment to democracy

The emphasis of the Durban summit was not on economic issues, but on democracy. Leaders committed to hold fair elections at regular intervals, allow opposition parties to campaign freely, and set up independent electoral commissions to monitor polls. This reflects the emergence of a new generation of African leaders who are now aware of the importance of democracy for development. Indeed, 42 out of 48 sub-Saharan states held multi-party elections during the 1990s compared to only four states which held free elections in the 1980s. However, doubts have emerged about cases like Libya, Kenya, and Zimbabwe. United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan was the only one, in his speech in Durban, to condemn the manipulations of recent elections. "Too often, in recent times, the name of democracy has been misused to describe situations where a vote is taken without free and fair debate beforehand". The commitment to democracy and human rights will be checked through a permanent elections monitoring unit that will scrutinize any violation of these principles.

The Durban summit also adopted the procedural rules and statutes of the organs and institutions of the Union. The AU will constitute all African countries except Morocco, which withdrew from the OAU in 1982 when the OAU recognized the Saharawi Democratic Republic.

Modelled on the European Union, the AU will comprise an Assembly, a Commission, a Central Bank, a Court of Justice, and eventually a Parliament, and even a single currency. The Assembly, which will be the supreme organ of the organisation, will be composed of all the heads of state and government forming the Union. The Commission will assist the Assembly in the government of the Union. Its mandate should cover both political and economic integration, but its actual power as well as the role of the chairman will depend mostly on the resources it will receive. An important decision was made at the last minute: it was decided that five of the 10 Commissioners would be women. This represents a change from past and present practices: indeed, at the

In a letter sent to Thabo Mbeki, President of South Africa, European Commission President Romano Prodi welcomed the creation of the African Union and confirmed the Commission's support for the African leaders in their ambitious project based on ownership and leadership. Prodi pointed out how "the AU will be instrumental in promoting the advancement of democracy, human rights and sound economic policies across the continent by setting high standards of economic and political governance". He also underlined how "in the context of globalisation stronger integration in Africa is a precondition to enhance the overall political and economic integration of Africa in the world economy". He reaffirmed the willingness of the Commission "to develop and strengthen its political dialogue with Africa as a whole and with its new political institutions".

moment none of the 53 African heads of state is a woman. Women were completely absent from the structure of the OAU. Africa has thus become the only continent in the world that has made such a commitment towards gender equality.

Money will be an important challenge. Most of the countries have yet to pay their financial dues. The African Union in fact inherits a debt of more than \$40 million from the OAU and there is still no plan on how to solve this problem.

An important new institution is the 15-member Peace and Security Council. Structured on the UN Security Council, the Council will be tasked with the prevention, management and resolution of conflicts. It will be composed of five semi-permanent members (one per region) and ten elected members for two-year terms. Unlike the OAU, the AU will have the right to intervene in cases of gross violations of human rights and crimes against humanity. For this reason, the formation of a peace-keeping force drawn from African armies has been planned.

A brighter future?

It is not yet clear whether the AU is the right means to shape Africa's future. The enormous challenges the AU is already facing confirms the fact that change cannot happen overnight. The African Union succeeds an organisation that was widely criticized for its inability to mediate the continent's conflicts. The most critical element of the AU is its authority to intervene in the internal affairs of member states. The issue now is whether the AU will be able to use its new powers or whether the competing interests of its leaders will paralyse it. But, regardless of some initial scepticism, the African Union opens a new era for Africa, where peace, democracy, and good governance are finally considered the necessary pre-requisites for development. ■

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1. See article "The European Union and the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD)" by Dr Francisco Granel on page 28 of this issue.

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