

Special EDITION

Towards Effective Campaign for African Union Commission Chair: A Critical Examination of Kenya's Bid

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By Sylvanus Wekesa, Ph.D., and Chepkorir Sambu

Executive Summary

The African Union (AU) represents a body of collated efforts that bargain for collective continental interests. The recent opening for the African Union Commission Chairperson seat has fetched amplified political action across Africa, as political figures and AU member states present their bids. Kenya's opposition leader, a pan-Africanist and a decorated flame of freedom, Mr. Raila Odinga, is among those who have placed their bid for AU Commission (AUC) chairmanship. It is a development parallel to Kenya's President William Ruto's open assertions and declarations championing Africa's self-independence and furthering the development of stronger policies and frameworks geared towards solving Africa's problems. In supporting Raila's bid, President William Ruto presents a new African era of vibrant politics and a more robust image of advocating against the continent's invasive Western interferences. The AUC chair position is instrumental in shaping the continent's course and effort to further the African agenda and deepen collaboration and integration among member states (Murithi, 2020).

Introduction



Despite taking over office in 2022 with what appeared to be an unclear policy for diplomacy, President Ruto is undoubtedly on a mission to position Kenya at the forefront of regional leadership and shape the country's foreign relations agenda. Perceived largely as an underdog in diplomatic circles, Dr. Ruto silenced his critics within a few months after ascending to power by striking deals with some of the world's most powerful leaders and stealing the show in the regional meetings he has been attending. President Ruto's predecessor, Uhuru Kenyatta, has been lauded by many for reinvigorating Kenya's foreign policy. His charisma and passion for addressing international and regional issues, especially those relating to security, saw him warm his way into the hearts of Western nations.



Kenya's foreign policy aspirations are contained in the 2014 Foreign Policy Document, a comprehensive text with a guiding mission to project, promote, and protect

Kenya's interests and global image through innovative diplomacy (KIPRA, 2014). The policy emphasizes the significance of Africa's political unity through regional and sub-regional integration. President Ruto should leverage Kenya's increasing influence within the African Union (AU) to strategically lobby for the prestigious AUC Chairperson seat when it falls vacant later this year. By doing so, he will propel Kenya's foreign policy aspirations and solidify the country's position as a regional leader.

Simultaneously, this will be a chance for the President to help the AU re-assert itself and implement, more proactively, its different normative and institutional architectures, especially after his appointment as the African Union Champion for Institutional Reform in February 2024. The AUC Chairperson seat and the AU Champion for Institutional Reform are positions which offer each other perfect complementarity.

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 info@horninstitute.org
 www.horninstitute.org

 +254 720 323 896
 +254 735 323 896

 Durham Road, Kileleshwa
P.O. Box 25632 - 00100
Nairobi – Kenya

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Unifying the Regional Blocs by Leading the Reforms

President Ruto's commitment to diplomatic reform is evident in his intention to revitalize the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), an organization that has faced stagnation in certain areas. The recent war in Sudan has provided IGAD with a renewed sense of urgency and purpose, prompting collaboration with the African Union (AU) in the search for a viable solution. President Ruto has taken the lead on this issue. Additionally, the President has consistently advocated for the reintegration of Eritrea into regional dynamics, emphasizing the need for collective efforts in driving progress and unity within the region. This, he demonstrated by championing the lifting of Eritrea's suspension from IGAD.

Furthermore, Kenya's commitment to stability, peace, and security in the Horn of Africa is unwavering. This is demonstrated by its long-standing involvement in the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM, now, African Union Transition Mission in Somalia [ATMIS]) over the past decade for peacebuilding purposes. Recently, President Ruto has been engaging in efforts to reconcile Ethiopia and Somalia following tensions between the two countries (Africa News, 2024). These tensions arose when, in January 2024, Ethiopia signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with Somaliland, a self-declared sovereign state internationally regarded as part of Somalia (Mohammed, 2024; Harter, 2024). The escalation of the conflict causes instability in the region and hinders development, hence the strong proposals for agreement and collaboration. Through its foreign policy, Kenya has proven to be a key driver in promoting partnership and regional peace through a shared commitment towards political and commercial development.

Within the East African Community (EAC) bloc, Kenya has assumed a leading role in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) peace process through the Nairobi Peace Process chaired by former President Uhuru Kenyatta (EAC, 2023). Through its participation as a troop-contributing country to the just concluded East African Community Regional Force alongside Uganda, South Sudan, and Burundi, Kenya has actively promoted peacebuilding and stability in the region. The subsequent admission of Somalia into the EAC, which came against the backdrop of Kenya's overwhelming support, has bolstered Kenya's stature as a brother's keeper. Leading consultative and stakeholder meetings on cantonment and disarmament matters in DRC, former Kenya President Uhuru Kenyatta addressed the delicate situation that involves multiple parties and conflicting interests. The Nairobi Peace Process proves to be a key

peacebuilding mission that engages stakeholder dialogue and inspires open consultation to address the complex issues in DRC. The recommendations addressed the need to fast-track the cantonment process to provide the basis for further engagement and development towards disarmament, repatriation, and reintegration in DRC.

Why the AUC Chair Post Matters

Kenya's recent conclusion of its two-year tenure at the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) marked a historic milestone in the country's foreign policy. This invaluable experience allowed Kenya to shape global security debates and assume strategic roles internationally.

There has never been a more opportune time for Kenya to pursue the African Union Commission Chair seat. President Ruto must strategize and rally support to bring this esteemed continental leadership position to Kenya, aligning with the country's foreign policy aspirations. The AU holds paramount importance as the primary continental body responsible for shaping and implementing the development agenda of Africa (Murithi, 2020). President Ruto has advocated for reforms to ensure the African Union responds better to the needs of African citizens. The AUC Chair position is instrumental in harnessing the African voice in negotiating, navigating, and shaping responsive policies and solutions to African problems (Tieku, 2021).

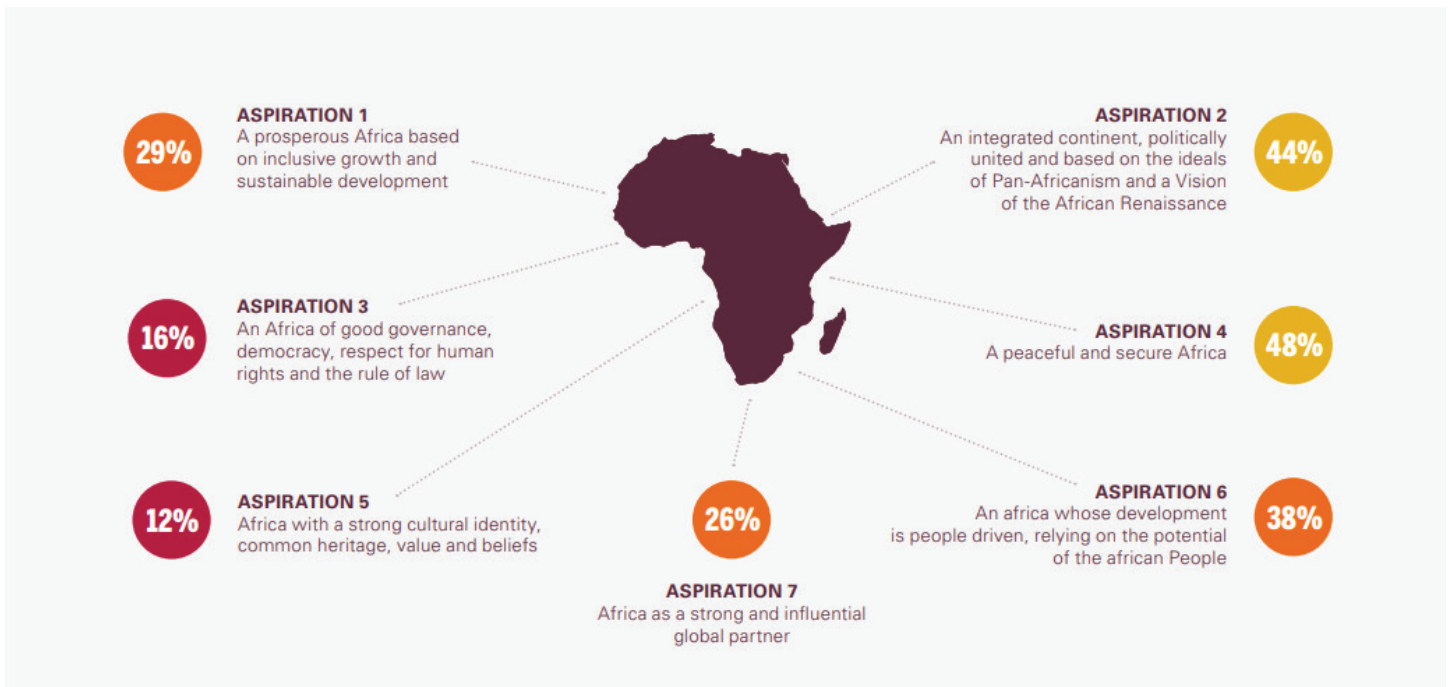
President Ruto is well-advertised as a self-directed promoter of the African agenda. His recent address on global and regional platforms has been replete with strong statements and assertions that promote African ideas. He outrightly calls for a more politically and economically independent African continent and better funding policies that do not cripple African independence. These ideals are resonating with Africans as they communicate the African agenda and address the external political and economic interferences that often affect national and local agendas, exposing African states to extreme social violence, political instability, and corruption. Therefore, President

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Ruto has presided over a different and transformative African agenda, calling for a strong statement of African independence and pushing for a better and more inclusive bargain on the global stage. The AUC position presents the opportunity to further and deepen the African agenda and navigate the intricate political and economic bargaining spaces in addressing African problems.

Currently, the continent is facing a myriad of challenges, many of which are unprecedented. Instability is rampant in almost every sub-region. Political instability is prevalent in numerous states, exacerbated by coups and unconstitutional extensions of power; conflicts are raging in the Horn of Africa, the Sahel, and parts of North Africa; and an unprecedented humanitarian crisis is experienced in several states due to both climate change

and conflicts. The continent is in dire need of transformative leadership, and Kenya has the opportunity to provide this. According to the continental report on the implementation of agenda 2063, the continent has clear aspirations from inclusive growth and sustainable development, peace and security, to Africa as a strong and influential global partner. The AU plays a central role in the realization of the set goals and aspirations. By securing the influential AUC Chairperson seat, President Ruto would realize his continental goals and enhance Kenya's influence, leaving an indelible mark on the region and cementing his legacy in the hearts of Kenyans. It is a viable opportunity to explore and imprint Kenyan leadership skills in addressing collective regional issues and shaping better continental policies for improved African collaboration and integration.



Progress of agenda 2063 implementation - at aspiration level (Agenda, 2063)

According to Kufuor (2007), the AUC Chair discharges duties relating to the continental body's goals and aspirations. The incoming Chair will have a full in-tray that includes but is not limited to implementing long-standing AU reforms, especially on financial self-sufficiency, fully activating the AU Peace and Security architecture, and streamlining AU institutions to ensure they work better together. The chair will be a central figure in building upon the existing framework to unlock new pathways for collaboration towards self-sufficiency. Africa holds the opportunity to draft the future with immense resources, impressive demographics, and extensive room for political and economic growth.

The role of the AUC Chair is well articulated in the African Union Constitutive Act. In summary, the AUC Chairperson runs the organization administratively and financially. In addition, the Chair is required to promote and popularise the AU objectives and aspirations through consistent consultation with key stakeholders, including member states, development partners, and the Regional Economic Communities (RECs).

Candidate Raila Odinga: Strengths and Weaknesses

Despite local political dynamics, Mr. Odinga has extensive political experience spanning more than four decades in the

Kenyan political arena. Being a veteran opposition politician, who has contested five times for the Presidency, has given him the necessary platform to create networks within Africa and beyond (Mutambo, 2024). His stint as Prime Minister of Kenya between 2008-2013 granted him the much-needed experience of running government (Oyinloye, 2024). In addition, he has held different ministerial positions in Energy, Roads and Public Works.

In 2011, the AU named Mr. Odinga the mediator of the post-election conflict in Côte d'Ivoire between Laurent Gbagbo and Allasane Ouattara. This demonstrated that Mr. Odinga was not unfamiliar with the challenges affecting the AU member states. In addition, Mr. Odinga served as the AU High Representative for Infrastructure in 2018-2023. Mr. Odinga fashions himself a Pan-Africanist, and the position of the AUC Chair will grant him the platform to champion the ideals of Pan-Africanism at a time when the continent is facing an onslaught from geo-political competition (Omondi, 2024). He has built a good network with eminent persons on the continent, such as former Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo, who has since supported his candidature.

Despite the rich political capital and experience that Mr. Odinga wields, the biggest drawback might be his association and dalliance with opposition politicians across the continent. Campaigning on the platform of pro-democracy will run his election as AUC Chair into political headwinds. Mr. Odinga's push for democratic ideals is an albatross around his neck, so much so that he cannot dare condemn the anti-democratic ills of some African heads of state and government without upsetting the status quo. Mr. Odinga has not shied away from embracing opposition figures in African countries like Uganda

and Zimbabwe. In the process, this has rubbed the ruling figures the wrong way.

The duty of choosing the AUC Chair lies with the Heads of State and Government, and this might prove tricky, especially if Presidents who have an axe to grind with Mr. Odinga gang up to reject his candidature. The age factor is also not on Raila Odinga's side. At 78, some believe he is past his best and would do better, perhaps in the Panel of the Wise, than in the demanding AUC Chair position. With an organization struggling to shed off the tag of being a club of geriatrics, Mr. Odinga's choice will send a wrong signal in terms of the much-needed generational change that corresponds to Africa's majority young population.

In addition, despite having a long stint in the Kenyan political scene, he lacks regional and continental experience in matters of peace and security. Historically, a majority of the previous chairs of the AUC have been former ministers of foreign affairs. This implies they have relevant experience and knowledge of continental challenges. Their experience as ministers gave them ample opportunities to build and sustain relationships across the continent and beyond, as well as the ability to manoeuvre and manage the inner administrative workings of an inter-governmental organization. The centrality of the position of the AUC Chair requires a blend of multiple knowledge, skills and experiences, which Mr. Odinga lacks. This is perhaps the biggest disadvantage with his candidacy.

However, when democracy is failing in most African countries, which are witnessing the resurgence of coups and unconstitutional government changes, a chair in Mr. Odinga, a champion for democracy, will be a breath of fresh air for the Commission.

Conclusion

This will not be the first time Kenya is bidding for the AUC Chairperson seat. In 2017, Kenya unsuccessfully fronted former Minister of Foreign Affairs Amina Mohammed. The failure to win the seat then provides crucial insights for President Ruto's administration now to review before embarking on another journey. It is vital that lesson learnt then be consolidated to rectify past mistakes, inform its strategy for the current bid, and greatly improve Kenya's chances this time.

Recommendations

Kenya should:

- 1) Streamline its foreign policy decision-making process. Since coming into power, President Ruto's regime has been bogged down by numerous unforced errors in terms of foreign policy. This will provide clarity of objectives and repair any bad reputation or lost image continentally, especially amongst Kenya's neighbours.
- 2) Review some of the contentious policy decisions like withdrawing the support of Western Sahara at the beginning of Ruto's term in 2022, the decision to send troops to Haiti at the behest of the United States, and Kenya's continued support for Israel amidst the ongoing bombardment of Palestinians.
- 3) Build a broad consensus with its traditional allies, such as the EAC partner states. Kenya has an opportunity to build a coalition with other regions, too. It will need to court other regions, apart from East Africa, cautiously.
- 4) Create a team of experts to advise the candidate on the key interests of the continent.
- 5) Explain to Kenyans why the AUC Chair seat is important for Kenya's national interest to justify the resources invested.

From an operational perspective, Nairobi should consider the following:

- Streamline its foreign policy decision-making process.
- Review contentious policy decisions and build a broad consensus with its traditional allies.
- Create a team of experts to advise its candidate on the key interests of the continent and justify to Kenyans that the AUC chairperson position is a matter of national interest.

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End Notes

1. Poll data on AU bid showing candidates performance and likelihood to win the AUC seat not available.
2. Dr. Sylvanus Wekesa is a Research Associate at the African Leadership Centre, King's College. Chepkorir Sambu is a Researcher at World Peace Foundation focusing on conflicts in the Horn of Africa.

About the Writers

Dr. Sylvanus Wekesa

Dr. Wekesa is a Research Associate with the African Leadership Centre (ALC), King's College London. Wekesa holds a Bachelor's degree (BA) in History and Political Studies from Kenyatta University and a Master's degree (MSc) in Security, Leadership and Society from King's College London. Dr. Wekesa completed his Doctorate in Leadership Studies with reference to Security and Development at King's College London. Dr. Wekesa also is a regular commentator and analyst for BBC, Al Jazeera, Kenyan local media houses and regularly writes and publishes articles in various local and international media. Dr. Wekesa also has an experience as a Graduate Teaching Assistant at King's College London and a mentor to undergraduate and post-graduate students. Dr. Wekesa's other research interests include examining the role of regional economic groups in promoting peacebuilding and security, Kenya's foreign policy towards AU and other Africa RECs, non-institutional or alternative approaches to peacebuilding and security sector reform in post conflict societies and football.

Chepkorir Sambu's

Chepkorir Sambu is a lawyer and conflict resolution practitioner focusing on conflicts and peace processes in Africa. She holds a Bachelor of Laws from the University of Nairobi and a Master of Arts in Law and Diplomacy from The Fletcher School of Law & Diplomacy, Tufts University. Her thematic concentrations are International Negotiation and Conflict Resolution and International Legal Studies, as well as Kenya's Foreign Policy. She is currently a Researcher at the World Peace Foundation, her research specialising on Sudan, the wider Horn of Africa, and neighbouring Central African states.
