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Years of Democratisation in Africa: The Golden Jubilee of the OAU/AU and Beyond

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Introduction

The 19th Ordinary Session of the Assembly of the African Union (AU) held in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia in July 2012 selected the theme for 2013 as Pan-Africanism and African Renaissance. The Assembly adopted Assembly/AU/Dec.422 (XIX) Decision that implored the "AU Commission, in close collaboration with the Ethiopian Government to work together with all the Member States and the Regional Economic Communities (RECs) as well as other AU Organs to organize various activities, including media events, debates and competitions in schools and universities, public opinion surveys, sessions in local and national legislatures and other activities to celebrate the year of Pan-Africanism and Renaissance so as to enhance awareness of the new generation of Africans about the ideals of Pan-Africanism". This decision emanates from the recognition that this year marks 50 years since the OAU was formed on 25 May 1963 and officially launched in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

The 20th Ordinary Summit of the Heads of State and Government of the African Union held in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia in January 2013 further urged the Commission to expedite preparations for the 50th Anniversary of the OAU/AU including a special celebration Summit of Heads of State and Government slated for 25 May 2013 in Addis Ababa. It is also important to note that the celebration of the 50th Anniversary of OAU coincides with the ten years of the transformation of the OAU into the AU. The occasion marks a decade since the formation of the AU, which seeks to promote "an integrated, prosperous and peaceful Africa, driven by its own citizens and representing a dynamic force in global arena". The celebrations are planned for one year spanning 25 May 2013 to 25 May 2014. They will all evolve around the theme "Pan-Africanism and African Renaissance" consistent with the decision of the 19th Summit of the AU Assembly as highlighted above. How has Pan-Africanism and African Renaissance propelled democratization in Africa? This is the question that this article addresses.

Pan-Africanism and Democratisation in Africa

Pan-Africanism (ideology of African unity and liberation) inspired the establishment of the OAU in 1963 to drive Africa's continental integration and unity and support its liberation from colonialism. The last African country to be liberated was South Africa in 1994. The Pan-Africanist spirit was further reinforced and reinvigorated by ideals of African Renaissance (new ideology of African renewal and rebirth) in the late 1990s leading to the transformation of OAU into the AU beginning with the Sirte Summit of 1999 and culminating with the inaugural Summit of AU in July 2002 in Durban, South Africa.

While issues of peace, security and economic integration loomed larger over the past fifty years of OAU/AU, democracy and governance issues took backstage until the late 1990s. Many African countries prioritized nation-formation and state-building over and above democracy issues emphasising the need for community and social solidarity. Multi-party democracy was perceived as divisive and considered inimical to the communalist social solidarity needed for nation-formation and state-building. Thus, during the 1960s-late 1980s, the dominant modes of governance in a majority of African countries including military and one-party rule. Military regimes dominated mostly in West, Central and North Africa. One-party regimes dominated the political scene in East and Southern Africa. In Southern Africa, one party regimes (both de jure and de facto) were pervasive. Over and above the one-party phenomenon, democratic governance in Southern Africa was further eroded by the apartheid system in South Africa and Namibia with its devastating regional ramifications through wars of destabilization which had indelible Cold War fingerprints. Both Namibia (1990) and South Africa (1994) became the last colonies to be liberated completing the decolonization agenda of the OAU Liberation Committee.

Within the context of the ideological bipolarity of the Cold War era whereby the two superpowers (USA and USSR) locked horns world-wide for control and expansion of their spheres of influence, their concern was less about democracy promotion,

but rather winning the hearts and minds of allies and ensuring stability within their spheres of control and influence. So, political stability loomed larger in the ideological calculus of Cold War superpowers and to a large measure this acted as an external stimulus for African leaders not to prioritise democracy aware that even if they pursued authoritarian policies, these will not tarnish their international legitimacy within the Cold War context. In any case, post-independence Africa inherited from colonial administrations political systems that were far from being democratic in both form and content given that colonialism was, perforce, an autocratic, repressive and militaristic system. So, besides the Cold War dimension, newly liberated African states were constrained in pursuing democracy, in part, because the institutional architecture bequeathed to them by colonizers was authoritarian.

During the OAU era military coups and military regimes were a common feature of the continent's governance landscape. Over the past five decades of Africa's post-independence existence, the continent has experienced about 90 military coups. Increasingly, the OAU began to adopt a stance that governments brought about through unconstitutional means will no longer be tolerated especially since the late 1990s. Since then, the notion of sovereignty as a veil to shield human rights abuses and military take-over of power began to recede back. A culture of non-interference began to be replaced by the doctrine of non-indifference. Slowly, but surely, the notion of sovereignty as impunity was replaced by that of sovereignty as responsibility. It was in the late 1990s that the OAU, for the first time, took a firm stance against unconstitutional changes of government. The adoption of the 2000 Lome Declaration on the Framework for an OAU Response to Unconstitutional Changes of Government was an historic development. The Declaration affirmed OAU's condemnation and rejection of unconstitutional changes of government which were clearly defined to include military coups, mercenary interventions, rebellions and armed dissidence etc.

In Article 4 of its Constitutive Act, the African Union (AU) commits its Member States to the following democratic principles, among

others: (a) Respect for democratic principles, human rights, the rule of law and good governance; (b) Promotion of gender equality; (c) Promotion of social justice to ensure balanced economic development; (d) Respect for the sanctity of human life, condemnation and rejection of impunity and political assassinations, acts of terrorism and subversive activities; and (e) Condemnation and rejection of unconstitutional changes of governments.

Of its four thematic areas, APRM has a specific focus on democracy and political governance which includes promotion and protection of human rights, responsive and accountable governance institutions and constructive conflict management all of which are meant to assist African states treat sovereignty as responsibility while reserving the AU its responsibility to protect citizens against harm by states should such a situation arise. ACDEG has a specific section (Chapter 8) focusing on unconstitutional changes of government. In fact one of the primary drivers for the development and adoption of ACDEG was surely the concerted condemnation and rejection of unconstitutional changes of government in Africa. In its article 23, ACDEG expanded the definition of unconstitutional changes of government from a somewhat narrow definition provided for in the 2000 Lome Declaration. Within ACDEG, unconstitutional change of government now has a five-pronged meaning as follows: (i) Any putsch or coup d'état against a democratically elected government; (ii) Intervention by mercenaries to replace a democratically elected government; (iii) Any replacement of a democratically elected government by armed dissidents and rebels; (iv) Any refusal of an incumbent government to relinquish power to the winning party after free, fair and regular elections; or (v) Any amendment or revision of constitutions or legal instruments, which is an infringement on the principles of democratic change of government.

Clearly, the democratisation momentum that started during the twilight of the OAU has been entrenched much more during the era of the African Union (AU) with the adoption of the 2000 Constitutive Act of the AU, the 2003 Protocol Relating to the Establishment of the Peace and Security Council, the 2001 New

Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) and its governance off-shoot, the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM) of 2003, and the 2007 African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance (ACDEG).

Conclusion

Since the inception of the African Union (AU) in 2000 the momentum for democratisation throughout the continent has been accelerated. More countries have since embraced multiparty political systems. Politics of the bullet which marked the era of military coups on the continent between the mid-1960s and late 1980s has been replaced by politics of the ballot with almost all AU member states holding regular multi-party elections. Increasingly, mono-party and military regimes of the yesteryear are becoming obsolete and have been jettisoned through either constitutional engineering or popular protests/uprising as has been witnessed in North Africa since 2011. Military coups and other forms of unconstitutional changes of government are no longer a pervasive trend in the African political landscape today, despite such isolated cases as military coups in Mauritania (e.g. in 2009), Mali and Guinea Bissau in 2012 and armed rebellion which dislodged the government of the Central African Republic in March 2013.

In her opening speech during the 20th Ordinary Summit of the AU, the chairperson of the AUC, H.E. Dr Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma was emphatic that the spirit of Pan-Africanism and ideals of the African Renaissance will propel its citizens towards an integrated, people-centered, prosperous Africa at peace with itself. It is clear from the Chairperson's speech that democracy (people-centeredness) is at the heart of the future of African unity, integration and solidarity. She aptly reminded her audience that the spirit and ideals of Pan-Africanism and African Renaissance inspired the adoption of the 1980 Lagos Plan of Action, the 1990 Abuja Treaty and the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) of 2001 including its governance outfit, namely the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM) of 2003. She suggested that it is possible for African Union to achieve its vision articulated

above in a shorter space of time less than 50 years. From the Chairperson's speech, it is clear that the entire 50th celebration will aim to answer mainly three key questions related to the vision of African integration and unity: (a) what have we done over the past fifty years (b) Where the Continent is at today and (c) the direction that the Continent will take over the next five decades. In answering these questions, democratization of the continent should take centre-stage of this discourse. ■
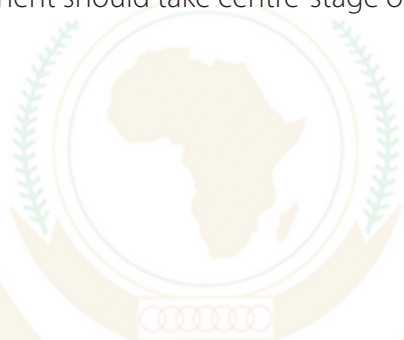
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