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Twenty years on the African Union's continental diplomacy has changed

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On the 20th anniversary of the Constitutive Act of the African Union entering into force, Candice Moore reflects on the diplomacy, vision and paradigm changes that brought it into being, and the differences between then and the Union today.

Just over 20 years ago, something noteworthy occurred. In a very unusual outcome for continental politics, African statesmen agreed to the creation of a new continent-wide African institution to replace the Organisation of African Unity (OAU), a body that had been known as a 'Club of Dictators'. Under the **strong leadership of three African leaders**, each with their own agenda, the continent's ruling class was ushered to a new understanding of continental security and cooperation, even if only on paper. South Africa's Thabo Mbeki, Libya's Muammar Ghaddafi and Nigeria's Olusegun Obasanjo, through varying

degrees of deft diplomacy and, it must be said, money on Ghaddafi's part, fashioned a new African organisation whose premises were starkly different from its predecessor's.

More generally, the first decade of the 21st century was an inspiring time in continental politics. The new African Union (AU) was agreed to in August 1999. The Constitutive Act that gives shape to the new worldview embraced by the continent entered into force in 2001 – the same year the **New Partnership for Africa's Development** (NEPAD) was established. The AU itself was launched in Durban, South Africa, in 2002. In 2000, a striking document, the **Conference on Security, Stability, Development and Cooperation** (CSSDCA) was accepted as part of a Solemn Declaration by the OAU, which was heavily influenced by former Nigerian President Obasanjo and, in **the words of the AU**, 'establish(ed) the fundamental principles for the promotion of democracy and good governance on the continent'.

This new approach started the shift towards a theoretical concern with human security over state security at the continental level – important because it drew the rough lines of what would be considered acceptable behaviour by states. It also built in a place for civil society in assisting to manage human security issues across the continent. Security came to be seen as indistinguishable from development. With hindsight, we can see what a magical time it was for African continental diplomacy. I am not suggesting that these leaders were without fault, only that the period was noteworthy for its massive change in focus.

So, what went wrong? A few things. National leadership changed within the key African powers, which had an enormous impact on continental diplomacy. The AU itself also rightfully subsumed within its work many of the famed and extraordinary summits that were called during the time of the OAU. Next, the global context changed, bringing in an era of greater austerity. Finally, the AU itself struggled to keep pace with continental realities.

A change in leadership

Olusegun Obasanjo was replaced by Umaru Yar'Adua in May 2007 in an election whose outcome was disputed. Although Yar'Adua was from the same political

party as Obasanjo, the People's Democratic Party (PDP), he did not continue Obasanjo's brand of continental diplomacy. In South Africa, Thabo Mbeki was replaced as leader of the African National Congress at a party conference in 2008, which ended his style of foreign policy, although Africa remained central to South Africa's foreign policy concerns on paper. Mbeki, who was the subject of much criticism for appearing to be a 'foreign policy president', had infused continental diplomacy with energy and vision. But after his departure there appeared to be an effort to undermine his work, as the new Zuma administration sought to distance itself from it. Once these two leaders left office, the wind left the sails of the grand continental projects that had animated the 2000s.

The AU itself stepped into the breach. In 2012, another South African, Dr Nkosazana Dlamini Zuma, was elected Chair of the AU Commission, the body's secretariat. The Commission was tasked with developing a new continental development plan: **Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want**.

Here we did not see individual state leaders coming forward with plans, as Agenda 2063 was developed by the bureaucracy of the African Union Commission. This affects the way in which a plan is promoted and supported. If it is developed by a bureaucracy, there is less incentive by individuals to take ownership of it and seek to build alliances to promote and support it. Recall the international appearances by Mbeki, Obasanjo, Abdelaziz Bouteflika of Algeria, Alpha Oumar Konare of Mali, and others, before the G8 to promote first the New African Initiative (NAI) and then NEPAD from 2001 onwards. That year a tradition of an 'African segment' of G7/8 meetings was started by Italy. NAI itself was a combination of a plan drawn up by Mbeki (Millennium Africa Recovery Plan, MAP) and one drawn up by Abdoulaye Wade of Senegal (Omega Plan). We have yet to see a repeat of this personalised form of leadership and vision in continental diplomacy.

This is not to say that all diplomacy has withered. The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) entered into force on 30 May 2019, after only three years of negotiations. While this sort of plan to deepen African economic and trade integration has been decades in the making, it is some feat to have concluded negotiations on an agreement and have the agreement enter into force within this timeframe.

Africa and shifting geopolitics

The global context has also changed dramatically from the early 2000s. The by-and-large unipolar order led by the United States at the time has given way to a more multi-faceted order and competing powers. While this should create new opportunities for support for Africa's continental programmes, it also means that this support is more diversified and possibly diluted to suit the individual political needs of powerful states such as China or the US. For one, US aid became increasingly militarised and tied to domestic political interests (such as Christian fundamentalism) in the 2000s, leading to new priorities for the country in Africa. Tony Blair's (and his successor Gordon Brown's) 'scar on the conscience of humanity' approach to Africa also gave way to a more pragmatic approach under the Conservative David Cameron. Barack Obama, in spite of his Kenyan heritage which some thought would enhance his engagement with Africa, did not preside over significant Africa-centric policies. The arrival of Donald Trump on the scene in 2016 only cemented Africa's role once again as a commodity and, in short, the audience for Africa's development initiatives by and large dissipated.

The African context itself became less hospitable to grand continental visions, as a number of dormant conflicts bubbled over once more (such as the RENAMO insurgency in Mozambique) and new conflicts erupted, not least the Arab Spring that ushered in the second decade of the 21st century. In particular, the fallout of Ghadaffi's departure is still being felt in Libya and beyond. Few have questioned, as Paul D Williams, George Washington University expert has, the financial implications for the AU and its continental diplomacy of Libya's fracture. The **contribution made by Ghaddafi's Libya** was sizeable, estimated at some 20-25% of the AU's budget, including paying the assessed contributions of a few smaller countries. Ghadaffi could host summits, such as the 1999 OAU Sirte Summit, at the drop of a hat, and while this function is now within the purview of the AU, the ability to perform such grand strokes must surely be missed.

Political will now and then

Finally, the ambitious dreams of the AU have been constrained by simple realities: a lack of political will and lack of capacity. This brings the achievements

of those authors of the new African Union in 2002 neatly into perspective. The support required to do away with the OAU in favour of a new institution that appeared to undermine one of the central tenets of the OAU – non-intervention – was phenomenal. Even leaders such as Uganda’s Yoweri Museveni and Zimbabwe’s Robert Mugabe were brought along in spite of their misgivings and reservations. Political will was required to bring the AU into existence and this was available in sufficient quantities at the time.

All the while, the AU itself remains a paradoxical prisoner of its own creators. While it has achieved a striking number of the objectives set out in the Constitutive Act of 2001, some of the loftier goals remain out of reach. Next year, in 2022, 20 years on from the launch of the AU, the record of the organisation can be examined. Now is the time, however, to reflect on the Constitutive Act and the elevated ambition and visionary, gritty diplomacy that brought it into being.

Photo: ‘Closing ceremony of the African Union Summit | Mauritania, 2 July 2018’.

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