US-African Leaders Summit should not just celebrate Africa’s achievements, but address difficult issues

Arthur Gwagwa presents civil society’s view of the upcoming US-African Leaders Summit on 4-6 August.

The 2014 US-Africa Heads of States Summit offers the US government an opportunity to further strengthen its ties with Africa. However, the message from the US ought to be very loud and clear: that Africa has now come of age, and can longer rely on the vagaries of history to avoid responsibility towards its people and its obligations in the global community. Reinforcing the status quo is not an option during the summit, but the leaders must make a commitment to chart a course towards a more democratic, secure, prosperous and sustainable Africa.

The Summit could not have come at a better time than now. Africa is standing at an historical crossroad where the choices it makes can either build on or reverse the monumental gains it has made in the past decade.

The continent has witnessed unprecedented economic growth, reduction in HIV infections, and has seen 35 peaceful transitions of power. However, there are still major worrying trends of human rights and democratic backpedalling. Further, the unprecedented economic growth in sub-Saharan Africa has not translated into socio-economic development. Major reasons for this can be found in lack of accountability, endemic corruption, dysfunctional governments and lack of rule of law.

The Freedom House 2014 report states that the state of fundamental freedoms in sub-Saharan Africa is at a very low level with some countries ruled by the same parties or leaders for at least 20 years, for instance Teodoro Obiang, Equatorial Guinea, 37; J.E. Dos Santos, Angola, 34; Robert Mugabe, Zimbabwe, 33; Paul Biya, Cameroon, 32 years and Yoweri Museveni, Uganda, 28. There has been an increase in authoritarian solidarity, for instance, collusions around elections, irrational positions on the ICC, and the passage of laws that restrict people’s fundamental freedoms under the guise of culture and public order. All these have disenchanted civil society, and if not addressed, will leave the disaffected with no choice but to resort to violence to redress their grievances.
The US-African Leaders conference can therefore be a normative counterpoint with a set of commitments that can arrest the current backpedalling and its potential consequences. Apart from recalling the notable achievements on the continent and in US-Africa relations, the conference must address difficult issues too. In addressing such issues, President Obama needs to make a strong case on the nexus between good, transparent and democratic governance with long-term prosperity, peace and security. For instance, Botswana moved from one of the poorest countries in the world, to an upper-middle income country, owing to sound fiscal management. Powerhouses like Tanzania, which are part of the Open Government Initiative, lead East Africa in attracting Foreign Direct Investment.

The current growth in the East African region could be the continental norm rather the exception. However experience of other resource-rich countries demonstrates that, without the appropriate safeguards, countries miss opportunities to use revenues from minerals to promote inclusive growth. Countries in the region risk exacerbating inequality while encouraging corruption and other social and environmental problems.

President Obama needs to use US political clout during the Summit to encourage these countries to be more transparent, strengthen their institutions, rule of law and adopt pro-poor economic measures, as this would help them to transform their natural resources into equitable growth and sustainable development. The current AGOA negotiations also offer an additional incentive for such a discussion.

In terms of the other specific deliverables, the Summit needs to underscore the importance of the following areas:

- The role of citizens’ active participation in political processes and regional cooperation to promote international human rights and democratic norms as a prerequisite for a free sub-Saharan Africa.
- Increasing the role of women and youths in political participation, leadership and governance. Both continents should invest and support efforts such as President Obama’s Young African Leaders Initiative.
- Engendering a culture of citizens participation in policy-making through a bottom-up, citizen-driven demand for accountability
- The current authoritarian solidarity should turn into top-down, peer-driven demand for accountability and good governance coming from the African countries by relying on the existing regional mechanisms.

How the Leaders’ Summit will tackle the above and other current issues will be decisive in whether this will be a tipping point in US-Africa relations and in changing the course of Africa’s narrative. Africa must demonstrate that it is not a young anymore, but a mature continent that can define its own destiny and influence the course and outcome of the US-Africa relations and other presenting global problems of our time. However, African leaders need to approach the Summit with candor, integrity and maturity, placing the interests of their people and those of the US above realpolitik.

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