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How the New African Union Leadership Should Improve the Organization

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For the African Union (AU) Commission, the election earlier this month of South Africa's Home Affairs minister, Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma, as chair offers a chance to address issues that have hindered the organization's image and its impact on the continent.

The new leader should provide leadership in pressing the organization to respond more effectively to the continent's crises, adopt reforms to strengthen accountability and transparency—particularly regarding the AU budget—and urge the membership to select better-qualified African governments to represent the region in multilateral bodies.

A Continent Divided. At the AU's meeting in January, neither Dlamini-Zuma nor Jean Ping of Gabon could secure the two-thirds majority required to win the chairmanship.

When delegates returned in July, they did so under pressure to end the stalemate. Dlamini-Zuma prevailed, despite breaking the unwritten rule that the largest African states not stand for the organization's highest office.

Richard Onyonka, a Kenyan assistant foreign affairs minister (whose country voted for Ping), called the victory “bittersweet” and said it “brought sharp divisions” among African states.¹ The challenge now before Dlamini-Zuma is to focus on addressing three critical weaknesses.

1. Take Decisive Action to Address Crises. The AU has long been criticized for failing to respond effectively to the continent's crises. When members could not settle on appropriate responses to civil wars in Côte d'Ivoire and Libya, the international community stepped in. In Côte d'Ivoire, President Alassane Ouattara received support from France to gain power and arrest former President Laurent Gbagbo. And, in Libya, the United Nations authorized a no-fly zone to protect civilians from the violence by the Muammar Qadhafi regime. Subsequent NATO action to enforce this resolution was criticized by African leaders.

Similarly, the AU has taken only minimal action to respond to ongoing security challenges in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, Mali, Sudan, and South Sudan. This inaction or indecisiveness undermines the AU vision of an “integrated, prosperous and peaceful Africa, driven by its own citizens and representing a dynamic force in global arena.”²

2. Improve Transparency and Accountability. The African Union's founding Constitutive Act obligates the organization to “promote democratic principles and institutions, popular participation and good governance.” Its Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance further requires the organization to “establish transparency and access to information among member states.” Yet detailed information on the AU's budget and other critical documents is not publicly available, its expenses are not independently audited, and regular and comprehensive evaluations of its operations and activities are either not conducted or not made publicly available.³

It is unusual for multilateral organizations not to make budget information public, and the U.S. and other contributors have pushed other organizations, such as the U.N., to make

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documents available and institute stricter oversight and accountability. These reforms should be strengthened, but they remain markedly better than those currently in place for the AU.

Such opacity is troubling inside and outside the continent. The AU cannot be “driven by its own citizens” if only African governments—many of which are not representative or exemplars of good governance—possess key information about the organization and its performance. Non-African countries provide millions in taxpayer dollars to support the organization and activities of the AU, and the U.S. and partner countries contribute millions more through multilateral organizations such as the African Development Bank and United Nations’ Economic Commission for Africa.⁴ Taxpayers in these countries should be able to assure themselves that their tax dollars are used prudently.

3. Stop Supporting Unsuitable African Candidates for U.N.

Positions. Typically, the U.N. and its affiliated funds, programs, and specialized agencies allocate leadership positions by region. African countries frequently use the AU to determine which countries run for various positions in the U.N. The AU usually nominates the same number of candidates as there are openings—a

practice known as offering a “clean slate”—to help assure the success of its candidates and avoid embarrassing defeats.

Thus, the slate the AU presented in July is virtually assured of success when the U.N. holds its elections. Many of the AU’s choices diminish the organization’s reputation and project the impression that the AU is unserious about the issues these organizations address and who represents the continent at an international level.

For instance, Sudan and Ethiopia are candidates for the U.N. Human Rights Council. Sudan’s president, Omar al-Bashir, stands accused of war crimes and genocide, and Ethiopia is notorious for its abuses. Somalia, a failed state without a permanent governing body, is a candidate for the Governing Council on Human Settlements. Mali, which is currently riven by internal conflict and without a government, is up for the U.N. Commission on Sustainable Development. Zimbabwe, which ranks far below the world average and even the sub-Saharan African region in the Human Development Index—and, specifically, the Health Adjusted Life Expectancy—is a candidate for the U.N. HIV/AIDS Programme Coordination Board.⁵

This practice, although not unique to Africa, undermines the

goals and objectives of the bodies on which these states sit. The AU would enhance its image internationally and send an important signal to all Africans by refusing to nominate unqualified candidates to positions in international organizations.

What the U.S. Should Do. To transform the AU into an organization that is respected and taken seriously in Africa and internationally, Dlamini-Zuma should:

- Increase transparency and accountability by providing detailed budget information and other documents to the public and establish an independent auditing body to investigate and oversee the organization and its activities,
- Respond to crises on the continent in a timely and effective manner, and
- Nominate qualified candidates to prominent positions in international organizations.

As a major donor with significant interests in the region, the U.S. has an interest in seeing the AU become more competent and a better example for good governance. To further these objectives, the Obama Administration should:

1. Though Dlamini-Zuma was endorsed by the South African Development Community, South Africa is Africa’s largest economy, and some governments feared that electing Dlamini-Zuma would allow South Africa to dominate the AU to the detriment of other member states. “Dlamini-Zuma Hailed at Home, Doubts Raised Abroad,” *Business Day*, July 16, 2012, <http://www.businessday.co.za/articles/Content.aspx?id=176374> (accessed July 16, 2012).

2. African Union, “AU in a Nutshell,” <http://www.au.int/en/about/nutshell> (accessed July 31, 2012).

3. Brett Schaefer and Morgan Lorraine Roach, “African Union: Transparency and Accountability Needed,” Heritage Foundation *Issue Brief* No. 3535, March 8, 2012, <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2012/03/african-union-transparency-and-accountability-needed>.

4. In 2010, the U.S. formalized its financial assistance to the AU with a \$5.8 million assistance agreement. The U.S. is also the largest contributor to the African Union Mission in Somalia, providing \$258 million since 2007. This funding, however, is sent directly to national governments rather than funneled through the AU.

5. U.N. Development Program, Human Development Index 2011, Table 9: Education and Health, http://hdr.undp.org/en/media/HDR_2011_Statistical_Tables.xls (accessed July 26, 2012).

- Clearly communicate U.S. policy on emerging crises and warn the AU that if it fails to respond to security threats, others may,
 - Make contributions to the African Union contingent on the AU improving transparency and accountability,
 - Track and publicly report annual information on all U.S. contributions to the AU and its activities,
 - Oppose unqualified candidates submitted by the African Union to prominent positions in international organizations and encourage our allies to do the same, and
 - Urge the region to offer more candidates than there are openings so member states can elect the most-qualified candidates.
- A Potential Force.** The African Union can be a major force for the

continent's stabilization and growth. But until significant changes are made, the organization is unlikely to realize its potential.

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