

AU summit: Family photo and participation

The 42nd Ordinary Session of the Extraordinary Session of the Executive Council started earlier today. In a matter of a few days, the 36th Ordinary Session of the African Union Assembly will be on. In this new contribution to 'Ideas Indaba', Solomon Ayele Dersso shares his reflections on how Agenda 2063, the Africa We Want could and should change the Family Photo of the AU Assembly and the level and nature of participation in the AU summit in the way the AU norm banning military coups changed the Family Photo from the OAU times.

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It is that time of the year when Addis Ababa plays host to the Heads of State and Government of African Union (AU) member States. Foreign Ministers making up the Executive Council of the AU are first to congregate in Addis Ababa on 15 and 16 February. They have kicked off their meeting earlier today with the opening session.

In a push to assert African agency, the Chairperson of the Executive Council, Senegal's foreign Minister told participants during the opening session earlier today that Africa expects to 'be heard, consulted and, most of all, respected in the choices it makes'.

The leaders of AU member states are set to descend on Addis Ababa on 17 February and hold the ordinary session of the Assembly of the AU on 18 and 19 February. The composition of the leaders of the continent which is reflected in the family photo they take after the opening session of the Assembly show

that nearly all of them are men. It is only the presence of Tanzanian President restrains observers from concluding that the Assembly is an 'only men' club, as former Liberian President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf's presence did previously.

I don't know whether to say bless the Tanzanians or praise to God or perhaps both that made possible the ascent of Samia Suluhu Hassan to Tanzania's presidency that now will shone bright light on the long road ahead to transform the AU Assembly from remaining a 'men's only' club.

I have a dream that one day, hopefully in the time of my daughter's generation, we will have a family picture of the leaders of the continent that is female dominated and reflective of the average age of people on the continent!

This is not to say that Africa has not made progress. I was at a dinner recently where I was reminded in a conversation about the OAU times and the progress made under the AU. Unlike the OAU times when it was not uncommon for some leaders to pitch at the summit wearing their military uniforms, today all of them smile in front of the camera wearing their suits, curtesy of AU norm banning coups and other unconstitutional changes of government. Indeed, even those who are military leaders who seized power militarily will show up wearing suit rather than their military uniform.

Of course, all five leaders except one who seized power by military coup during 2021/22 are barred from participating at this upcoming summit, they are ostracized for breaching AU's norm banning coups and other unconstitutional changes of government (to which we should return some other time). This was completely unthinkable during OAU times.

Curious to know the one military strongman who is accorded a privileged treatment of attending the summit despite seizing power unconstitutionally? If you don't know, are you sure that you are interested in African affairs?

In addition to the gender inclusivity of the AU Assembly, which is of course a function of the gender inclusivity or lack thereof of national politics, attendance in AU summit continues to be a topic of discussion. For example, this is first and foremost an issue for African civil society organizations, who would have liked to seize the occasion for championing specific issues of concern for the wider African public by having a slot for a representative of CSOs to make a statement at the opening session and have interactions with leaders on the corridors of the AU.

I hope that in the slow and challenging but steady progress to achieve agenda 2063, the Africa We Want, we will one day see a representative of African citizens bringing in the voice of African people to Mandela Hall during the opening of the Assembly session. And allow me to also dream that we will also make, as part of the journey to realize agenda 2063, the AU a union also of peoples of Africa and African decent not just that of states and governments!

Access to the AU during the summit is also a subject of discussion among AU partner countries. More so this year. The AU sent a note inviting partner countries to attend the opening session of the summit on the basis of 1+0 representation, signaling to partners not to bother with bringing to Addis Ababa high-level representatives from their capitals. While this means that partner countries would not be able to have interaction with as many leaders as they could around the summit, for the AU this ensures that it spares the leaders from attending the summit with divided attention. Yet, it remains an issue for which workable formula is yet to be found.

It is also curious if this 1+0 invitation has been extended to Israel whose AU observer status has been in dispute, triggering a heads of state and government taskforce for which there is so far no record of any convening since its establishment. In the meantime, the lobbying from Israel is in

full swing in Addis Ababa. Come this weekend, we may know if there is any resolution to this dispute, although the AU should not have been put in this situation in the first place considering the many continental issues that it should invest its time and attention on.

The other issue of attendance concerns which of the African leaders will make their pilgrimage to Addis Ababa or delegate it to their minister. This summit is billed to be one that will attract the attendance of large number of African leaders. Even if this were to happen, barring any intervening factors, you should not hold your breath that we will have as many African leaders as those who attended the EU-AU, China-Africa, US-Africa etc summits.

I dearly wish that they all come for their summit, demonstrate their pan-African commitment to the AU and its ideals. And prove me wrong.

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