

Center for Strategic and International Studies

TRANSCRIPT
Into Africa
**“Africa at a Crossroads: The 2025 African Union
Summit”**

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FEATURING
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Mvemba Phezo
Dizolele:

Welcome to Into Africa. My name is Mvemba Phezo Dizolele. I'm a senior fellow and the director of the Africa program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies. This is a podcast where we talk everything Africa, politics, economics, security, and culture. Welcome. Since its establishment in 1963 when it was called the Organization of African Unity, the African Union as we know it today, has positioned itself as a unifying body promoting economic integration, conflict resolution, and continental self-determination. However, recent developments, including the latest chairman elections and shifts in global geopolitics, have raised questions about the organization's effectiveness and direction.

The 2025 African Union Summit set the stage for critical discussions on Africa's political and economic future and the African Union's evolving role. Key issues included implementation of the African Continental Free Trade Area, responses to ongoing security challenges, and Africa's positioning in global governance structures. Meanwhile, the recent AU chairman elections have highlighted both the growing competition for leadership within the block, and the broader question of whether the African Union can effectively represent Africa's diverse interests on the global stage. How will the new chairman's vision shape the AU's priorities? What challenges does the AU face in maintaining unity and effectiveness? And how should African nations engage with international partners while preserving continental agency? Joining me to discuss these pressing questions is Dr. Solomon Dersso, adjunct professor at the University of Cape Town, and founding director of Amani Africa, a leading Addis Ababa-based think tank specializing in African Union policy processes. Dr. Dersso is also the lead author and editor of The African Union Peace and Security Council Handbook. His insight will provide a critical perspective on the implication of the 2025 African Union Summit and the future of continental governance. Solomon, good morning, good afternoon, and welcome to Into Africa.

Solomon
Dersso:

Thank you very much, Mvemba. Really great to be with you. It's wonderful to be invited and to have this conversation at a time of the kind that indeed puts the African Union on the spotlight as you rightly put it.

Mvemba Phezo
Dizolele:

You're one of the foremost experts on the African Union, you follow it daily. How do you assess the significance of the 2025 AU Summit in shaping political and economic landscape?

Solomon
Dersso:

Thank you very much for that question. If you put it in the context of previous Summits of the African Union, this being the 38th Summit, it's

difficult to say that there is anything particularly extraordinary about the Summit, but the context in which the Summit happened and some of the issues on the agenda of the Summit make it distinct from other Summits of the African Union. First and foremost, of course on account of the fact that this was the Summit during which the member states of the African Union elected the new leadership of the African Union Commission, which is actually the central engine of the day-to-day operation of the African Union. That is first and foremost the most important aspect of the organization of the African Union Assembly.

Second, there are very grave and serious peace and security issues that the continent is contending with, not least of all those in Sudan and Eastern DRC. And in this respect the African Union Peace and Security Council, the premier decision-making body on peace and security issues held a summit-level meeting on these conflict situations along with the African Union Summit.

Third, as you mentioned, issues relating to regional integration, including those of the implementation of the African Continental Free Trade Area, questions relating to the institutional reform of the African Union, and indeed the whole issue around the role and place of Africa and the African Union in the global arena have also featured prominently. And I think perhaps what makes all of these particularly pressing and different is basically the context in which the Summit happened.

Mvemba Phezo
Dizolele:

The context in which the Summit happened you say involved the election of the chairman of the commission and some of the other three issues that you mentioned. Let's stick with the election of the chairman. We had three major candidates that had positioned themselves. We have Djibouti, former Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mahamoud Ali Youssouf, Kenya's politician and former presidential candidate Raila Omolo Odinga, and Madagascar's former Minister of Foreign Affairs and Minister of Economy and Finance, Richard Randriamandrato. How did that work out? The media, anyway, we're not in Addis Ababa, but the media presented the Kenyan candidate, Raila Odinga as pretty much a shoe in. Kenya had invested a lot. President Ruto took him around to introduce him to his peers and campaigned for him. At the end he didn't win. How did that pan out and why Kenya lost?

Solomon
Dersso:

Well, in terms of the prediction, I think for those of us who have been following the election process closely, we were not convinced that there was any single candidate who actually had what you may consider to be a very firm and convincing lead on any of the other candidates. When we, for example at Amani Africa produced a policy brief just ahead of the Summit, we indicated that the possibility of particularly the leading two candidates, either one of them getting it was open. That is as you

mentioned, former Kenyan Prime Minister, Raila Odinga and the foreign minister of Djibouti, Mahamoud Ali Youssouf.

As far as the media landscape is concerned, the two candidates have not been covered in the same way. And the kind of, for example, one of the things that we picked up from our tracking of the Raila Odinga's campaign is that he has been to 40 countries on the continent, meeting at least 40 heads of state and government. That is huge. I mean for, I don't know if there has ever been such level of moving around and getting to different capitals of the continent for the purpose of this kind of election. And as a result of that, and of course, the kind of attention that he was able to mobilize coming from Kenya and Kenya having a robust media space, all of that, I think adds up to give you the idea that this candidate has been the most visible, the most widely seen in different capitals, and so on. And that of course gives you the potential impression that he has captured that tension, at least at the level of media.

But these are elections that are about leadership of the African Union Commission. They do not depend on just that. It's not to discount the importance of that, but that on its own clearly is not enough. People, particularly the electorate, so to speak, have to be convinced about other aspects as well. And I think there were developments that relate to question of age in one way or another. It played a role. The elections that happened for other members of the AU Commission, particularly the four members of the AU Commission, remember they were elected at the level of the executive council, and all the four of them were from Anglophone countries. That must also have had some kind of impact, and of course, other issues that emerged around the internal dynamics in the African Union. But one thing that was clear in respect of which we also highlighted a point is basically that member states were clear that they will not allow a deadlock or an outcome that would be inconclusive. They actually engaged and campaigned in such a way that there would be a conclusive outcome.

And this came of course against the background also of what happened during the election of members of the Peace and Security Council at the level of the executive council where for the first time in the history of the Peace and Security Council the northern region was not able to actually have a representative in the Peace and Security Council, because the candidates who got the most votes, 32 votes, that's Algeria, didn't manage to get the one more vote that could have made it into the membership of the Peace and Security Council. And that triggered a certain level of mobilization on the part of some members to say, "Look, we shouldn't have a situation where any of the candidates who is leading should be blocked from getting the two third majority required for him or her to be elected."

As you can see during the election process, initially I think one round or two rounds Raila was leading. After the third round the Madagascar candidates dropped out, because after the third round when no one gets the two-third majority the candidate with the least votes would be dropped out. When that happened, immediately the dynamics changed. Instead of Raila, it was Mahamoud who actually got the highest number of votes. And he sustained that until the sixth round, at which point Raila had to be dropped. And then during the last round Mahamoud got the 33 votes required for him to clinch the victory.

Mvemba Phezo
Dizolele:

That's nine rounds of-

Solomon
Dersso:

Seven.

Mvemba Phezo
Dizolele:

Seven rounds. Okay, so 40 countries for campaign for Raila Odinga. Kenya, Nairobi particularly is a hub of the media, so I get that the media covered it in a certain way. It's Kenya after all, they get traction with the media.

Solomon
Dersso:

Of course, we have to admit that there was also certain sectors in Kenya who were campaigning against Raila Odinga as well, I think just to-

Mvemba Phezo
Dizolele:

That's correct as well, Kenya being such a dynamic democratic space. Given all that still, how does Djibouti, you also mentioned the language divide where you have the Anglophone and the Francophone, but then also you talked about the northern countries. Given these divides and this reality, how does Djibouti gain traction? What were the dynamics at play? Djibouti is a small country, after all.

Solomon
Dersso:

Definitely. I mean, if you look at it from the historical perspective, it's not uncommon for candidates coming from smaller countries to actually be elected into the African Union leadership. If you go back to the time of the OAU, you'd find some secretary was from Togo, for example-

Mvemba Phezo
Dizolele:

Edem Kodjo.

Solomon
Dersso:

Edem Kodjo, and then Jean Ping was from Gabon. The fact that you are from a small country actually historically was not a disadvantage. Actually, people seem to feel that, "Actually this is somebody that we can do business with." You wouldn't have the weight of a leading country and therefore may tend to be much more accommodative for

different members. And for Djibouti, I think a number of things would be at play. I mean, various commentators, for example, they were saying, "In terms of understanding the African Union, definitely he has shown clear advantage over the other candidates among others, for example, during the 'debate.'" It was more a question and answer session rather than a debate. But during that debate that the African Union hosted many particularly African Union experts and observers, they said that he had an advantage as far as demonstrating that he has knowledge of the African Union.

During the election he came out also, speaking on point within the five minutes that he had, and without stumbling. And Raila on the other hand, he looked tired, he didn't finish sharing his vision within the five minutes time limit, and that must have also played a role. The other thing is people say, for example, issues relating to regional dynamics, while Kenya, a major country both in East Africa and the Horn of Africa, despite the weight that it has, sometimes in respect to certain issues Kenya would find itself on difficult spots.

Djibouti, on the other hand, it doesn't have any of those issues that is like that of Kenya, such as for example, in terms of what happened around the DRC with respect to incidents leading up to the Summit. It is really a combination of a multiple factors that were at play that led to this kind of outcome. I mean, honestly speaking, Raila could as well got it.

Mvemba Phezo
Dizolele:

Did age play a role against Odinga?

Solomon
Dersso:

I think it played a role, particularly as last part of the, you know, just before the election when they were asked to engage in sharing their vision he looked tired and it took him quite a lot of time for him to communicate what he wanted to share by way of his vision for the African Union.

Mvemba Phezo
Dizolele:

In terms of vision, now that Mahamoud Ali Youssouf has won the chairmanship of the commission, what is his vision? What do you think will dominate the agenda, and how should African leaders approach his agenda that he has put forth for the organization?

Solomon
Dersso:

In terms of what is expected from his side and what he put forward, of course, one has to do with the effective functioning of the African Union, including issues relating to, for example, making sure that the agenda of the Summit would be focusing on what you may consider to be strategic issues, and other entities that have the mandate actually take care of all other, what you may consider to be non-strategic but programmatic issues. I think that is one thing that you clearly see. He

also said that he worked towards a more effective response and approach to the plethora of peace and security issues facing the continent at this point in time. Another area that he highlighted related to economic development and integration, including the need for fast tracking implementation of the AfCFTA, and of course, ultimately the effective representation of the continent in the global arena in a way that advances the interest of the continent.

These are the areas that he's looking at, but he also would be dictated by the context in which Africa finds itself in now. And of course, internationally as well. Internally, the continent, as you know, faces a plethora of challenges, some of them political, including the rife in interstate tensions that we have come to witness, trades for the division or fragmentation of states that are also major issues for the continent. And then of course, the economic dimension of issues, including more than 20 countries being distressed. And therefore this affecting the economic conditions of people very, very seriously. Then you have the external dimension, the fast change and the enormous challenge at the global level are such that they require what you may consider to be, as we put it in our various reports, an approach that is different from the business as usual approach. That the African Union pursued during the past few years.

Mvemba Phezo
Dizolele:

No business as usual. When you say that we know of course that Africa has been facing, the AU specifically, tremendous criticism over its handling of particularly the two conflict that you mentioned, Sudan and the DRC. And when we look at those two contingencies there, what we see is all system failed across the board. The DRC issue is continuing to be on top of the agenda with no end in sight. Sudan, of course, we know what has been happening there. You talked about reforms. Reforms have been on the agenda for a long time. And nothing seems to improve, at least from where I stand. You may see things differently because you are in Addis and you're engaging with these actors. How does the African Union address this under this new leadership? Of course, the chairman is new, but a lot of the leaders are the same. And it depends on their input as well and the goodwill to get the reforms implemented.

Solomon
Dersso:

A quick one. I think we are in a moment of leadership crisis. Multilateralism moving crisis. That is true not just at the international level but also in some ways it is a manifestation of the crisis of multilateralism in Africa as well. Those issues that you have mentioned around the extent to which the African Union's engagement in Sudan or in Eastern DRC has been effective. If you look at it from a global perspective, I think we are in a moment of crisis of response to conflicts and political crisis globally. And the African Union is one of those manifestations. I think it's important to really put this in that broader

context. Even then, if you look at particularly Eastern DRC, I don't know what your take it, you are the expert for issues relating to that part of Africa.

Our consideration is that, had it not been for the Luanda Process, things would have even been much worse than they have been. That at the very least the Luanda Process helped line of communications to be maintained. It helped to avoid, there was a time, if you recall, when the two countries came nearly pledging themselves into full-fledged direct armed confrontation. This is not at all to minimize the circumstances, but we seem to be in a time when the measure of success is no longer that we are used to during the previous decades, which is basically to bring conflicts to a conclusive end through the signing of a peace agreement. Unfortunately, we are in an era when the best that you hope for is basically the kind of outcome, such as for example, in Northern Ethiopia as it relates to Tigray with the Cessation of Hostilities Agreement. Not the comprehensive peace agreement of the past decades.

And even then it is after you have seen a level of battlefield dynamics that have suggested that this is not going to continue and people have exhausted themselves. One side is almost on the verge of basically losing totally. These are the kinds of contexts that we have. I think in a way, yes, I wouldn't call it a complete failure of system. If you look at it, for example, from the perspective of the work of the Peace and Security Council, the Peace and Security Council actually on Sudan tried different things. For example, initially there was no high-level panel that was established to work 24/7 as a fully dedicated mechanism. It was the PSC that actually said, "Look, we requested you as the chair of the African Union Commission to dedicate a Special Envoy." Well, that Special Envoy didn't really manage. His baggage was not that much liked by Sudanese. And that undermined the engagement of the African Union in respect of that file.

It took quite a while. I mean, the AU lost quite a lot of time as a result of that. But corrective measures were taken because of the Peace and Security Council. And later on you would see the PSC when the high-level panel was also struggling and it didn't see any meaningful movement forward, it wanted to bring the entire weight of the African Union to bear on the situation in Sudan. What did it do? We proposed that it established the five ad hoc heads of state and government committee. Again, its implementation became an issue.

How the new leadership of the African Union would deal with this, what we proposed is basically we wrote a special research report. We titled it Memo to the New African Union leadership. This is a very important piece of work that we put together after over a year of research. And one of the things that we proposed is that there is a need

for a strategic review of the approach of the African Union to peace and security. And this we said because of two things. One is, conflicts have increased, there complexity has deepened. At the same time the way the African Union going about responding to them has actually left a lot to be desired if it has become completely dysfunctional and not effective. And therefore, what this requires is basically to really pull back, have a strategic review, and then direct your efforts around how you mobilize your responses. From conflict prevention to dealing with current ongoing conflicts, to that of making sure that those who are in the process of, for example, implementing peace agreements like in South Sudan, do not relapse back to conflict.

For that you need actually sustained engagement. And your intervention has to be anchored on a strategy tailored to each conflict situation. You can't just do this touch and go. Escalate and then you run to say, "Oh, we're concerned." You are concerned, so what. I mean, who cares about your concern? What do you do about it is what is needed. And that requires a strategy that is implemented and followed up with all the energy and resources that you have. But importantly apart from that is the kind of relationship that you have with member states, with regional economy communities, with the wider international community matters security. What that means is basically you need to mobilize. Solid consensus and diplomatic support from member states if you are going to succeed.

If you are unable to do that, whatever you do, it wouldn't succeed. And remember that you by yourself alone when it comes to conflict situations and African issues, don't overestimate the influence or the weight that you have individually as chairperson of the African Union Commission, all right? You play a critical role, but your role essentially is one of convincing, persuading, mobilizing consensus, building and enlisting the support of member states. And indeed getting everybody else, including RECs and the international community behind your strategy. That is when you would have a chance of success, and that's how previous successes have been registered by the African Union such as even in Sudan through the African Union High Level Panel in Sudan under President Mbeki.

Mvemba Phezo
Dizolele:

But Solomon, you know, all that you describe is right on point. At the same time, if you're a Sudanese stuck in any of these conflict zone or if you're a Congolese in Goma or in the mountain of South-Kivu or North-Kivu, the difference is not there, right? You've seen EACRF come, you've seen the Kenyans come and leave, you've seen President Tshisekedi fight with each other, you've seen Prime Minister Abe showing up in Sudan, you've seen Kenya and things are not particularly moving forward. And I would like just to add and ask you, have African leaders also lost a sense of holding themselves accountable for the charter? And

also, calling each other out. You cannot have countries that are invading other countries and nobody can condemn it calling for what it is.

We talked about the sanctity of borders, but yet you have countries that are invading other countries. You have other countries arming other subversive groups in the case of RSF and SAF in Sudan. You have foreign forces coming in and fueling the conflict. Yet, for the most part African leaders are quiet, they dangle, they dilly-dally around the issues. It's left to us as analysts, as think tankers and journalists to call out the spade a spade. What has happened? Why is there such a, I don't know if we call it the dereliction of duty or just giving up on principles, and people not really accommodating the people they're supposed to serve?

Solomon
Dersso:

That's really an excellent question, Mvemba, absolutely. You hit the nail on the head on this one. And the time when the African Union has shown successes was the time when the leaders of African countries have shown care, a sense of Pan-Africanism. And the willingness to work together, and to be candid with each other. It is under those circumstances that the transition from the organization of African unity to the African Union was made possible. And indeed the effective take off the African Union once it has come into existence was made possible because of this. Leaders like Thabo Mbeki, President Olusegun Obasanjo, Abdel Fattah, Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, and these set of leaders with a sense of Pan-Africanism, but also willingness to be candid with each other were able to engage and exercise a responsible leadership. Not just leadership holding a position, but leadership that actually knows what comes with that, with being in a position of decision making, right?

It is under those conditions. Currently, the crisis of leadership exactly is basically the lack of these features at the moment. Rather what you have is indeed the level of trust between leaders, as you can see is at a very low by standards of recent years. If you count it by standards of the past two decades, it's at it's low, whether it is in East Africa, in West Africa, or in the Central Africa region as you clearly see. In some of these regions such as West Africa, it has indeed led to the breakdown of regional orders with ECOWAS having been actually now left with and losing three member states and actually constituting by landmass, almost half of the landmass of ECOWAS. You know, result of the crisis of leadership that we have at the moment.

Mostly leaders have tended to be increasingly transactional in their approach, mostly tend to be inward-looking, understandably also because of many political issues that they have to deal with and to contend with themselves. And when they engage regionally, it is in a way that really actually leads to the kind of issues that you have mentioned. Either to basically engage in interfering in affairs of other

countries, or in taking measures against this or that. This is actually first and foremost a crisis at the level of ideas, at the level of the character of leadership. And then that manifesting itself. And the African Union norms, policies and principles, including the most fundamental ones, such as sovereignty and territorial integrity of states, can only be realized and meaningfully be defended if there is a conviction to support and stand by those principles.

If you actually do not have that particularly on the part of the leaders of member states, indeed the rest of us would be shouting from the top of our lungs. But that is the challenge, I think, that we face, and without addressing that it would be difficult. That is why, for example, in terms of even approach, there is a generational change in terms of leaders, as you know, Mvemba, generational change in terms of leadership. That break that happened between those leaders that I mentioned and their successors is incredible in terms of the outlook of these leaders towards the rest of the continent outside of their country and outside of their own region. The most that they are concerned about is their own region, beyond that, hmm.

Mvemba Phezo
Dizolele:

On that point you mentioned ECOWAS, I was coming to that. If there is no commitment to the charter of this organization, this is what I was referring to when I say all systems failed. It's not that people are not trying, the Rwanda process is good and all that, but all that is stalled. You have Rwanda process, you have Nairobi process, then you had President Kagame want to go bring in Turkey when they were at the process going in Africa. You have SADC doing its own thing. Is there a risk here that, my view may be a bit radical, but is there a risk here that the AU will become totally irrelevant if African leaders persist in this direction in the way that ECOWAS became irrelevant to most people living in that region? It became the ECOWAS of the leaders, not the ECOWAS of the peoples.

It seems to me just through my engagement with people on the ground, people are not sure what the AU added to their lives really on a daily. It's a big thing that is far away. It's heavily influenced by foreign actors as well, the likes of China and EU. And people ask, "What are they doing for us?"

Solomon
Dersso:

First in terms of the delivery for the ordinary citizens. I don't know how much can be expected of the AU. What you expect of the AU in terms of citizens is on issues relating to, for example, accountability. How far the African Union is able and can bring in and inject a level of accountability that is actually lacking at the national level. Much of the policies of the African Union depend in terms of meeting the needs of citizens, as you know, implementation by and at the level of individual states. Once policy decisions have been taken, how they are

domesticated, translated into national actions, is actually the responsibility of individual states. On that one it's difficult to say that the African Union needs to be blamed for that. Where the African Union needs to be blamed as far as citizens is concerned is where it has pronounced or put in place policies such as, for example, governance, democratic governance and human rights, and respect to that what it is that the African Union is able to do.

And sometimes we do not know enough about those things. We tend to make therefore a blanket dismissal of the African Union. We have to be careful about that, because there are certain spaces and corners where the African Union system, for example, actually provides that space for citizens' voices to be heard. If you look at institutions such as, for example, the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, if you go to the African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights in Arusha. Some of the decisions that the court have adopted prove to be decisions that member states, when I say members of governments didn't like. But when it comes to actually catering for the interests and needs of citizens, those are the kinds of decisions that have been taken at the level of these institutions. So, these institutions indeed provide that space.

That's why I'm saying, I understand what you are saying. At a macro level when it comes to the highest standards enshrined in the Constitutive Act of the African Union in terms of the behavior of states, you are right. But that doesn't mean that there are no spaces for citizens. And one of the areas of failure, I think, on the part of the African Union actually has to do with, for example, in making sure that people are aware of what kind of policies have been put in place, which citizens can leverage to call on and have their governments deliver on those commitments that governments have made. That is extremely important. If you look at, for example, the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance. Really a very progressive and hugely rich standards that are contained therein for advancing constitutionalism, for advancing rule of law.

There were instances in which they have been leveraged by citizens such as, for example, I remember in 2014 in Burkina Faso when Blaise Compaore was trying to basically overstay his constitutional welcome. What citizens did was basically to use the African Charter on Democracy and Elections to say, "No, we are not going to allow you to do this, because under the charter you are not allowed to stand there." Even when he refused, they said, "We will actually resort to ultimately taking matters into their own hands." That's how they actually forced him out of the country. And then that charter became a reference point for the transitional charter that they have actually adopted in Burkina Faso at the time. So, there are still resources that the African Union

avails, which citizens can leverage in order really to defend themselves, but also advance their interests, including at the national level.

Mvemba Phezo
Dizolele: Now, that's great, Solomon, I agree, and I think overall citizens have to assert themselves more and take matters in their hand in demanding more of this organization. On this note, Solomon, I would like to thank you, Dr. Solomon Dersso, Founding Director of Amani Africa Institute, a think thank you based in Addis Ababa for joining us today to talk about these processes at the African Union. Thank you.

Solomon
Dersso: Thank you very much, my brother. Pleasure to be with you.

Mvemba Phezo
Dizolele: Thank you for listening. We want to have more conversations about Africa. Tell your friends, subscribe to our podcast at Apple Podcasts. You can also read our analysis and report at [csis.org/africa](https://www.csis.org/africa), so long.

(END.)