



From the OAU to the AU: a reflection on lessons learnt



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On May 26 2001, the Constitutive Act of the African Union entered into force, thereby establishing the African Union. In this interview with the TfP Programme, international relations expert Professor Thomas Tieku reflects on lessons from the past and prospects for the future of continental peace and security.

What were some of the most notable changes to mark the transformation of the African Union (AU) from its predecessor, the Organization of African Unity (OAU)?

There has been fundamental mindset change in terms of a new form of pan-Africanism. The second generation of pan-Africanism had focused on decolonising the continent, while this shift saw a new focus on building a modern state system. But the modern state system is a means to an end, not an end in itself. And therefore, we needed to put human beings at the centre of pan-Africanism. That means that we have to focus on development issues, governance issues, and of course, conflict management and conflict resolution. The most fundamental shift has been the move to what I consider to be the third phase of pan-Africanism.

Looking back, how has the AU fared in preventing, managing and resolving conflicts?

The most fundamental shift was that human security was moved to the centre of conflict resolution, and the AU did amazing work to develop norms around those elements. We have all these structures – continental early-warning systems, the AU Peace and Security Council, and mechanisms at the regional and even the state level. The next level should have been our communities, because they are the ones who actually stand to manage, prevent and resolve conflict. And we haven't done that.

An offshoot of the development of this strong normative framework was that the AU was able

to position itself to do more of the firefighting type of conflict prevention – with examples such as Burundi, Darfur and Somalia. An opportunity that we have missed was not moving from this firefighting spirit to building a second generation of norms, rules and institutions, and shifting towards a preventative mode.

Our peace and security institutions are biased in favour of firefighting, rather than towards prevention. Prevention is cheaper. It's easier – although is not always sexier. But it's cheaper, and it's easier to do. And we haven't done that. As a result, we are now feeling the true costs of remaining in this firefighting mode – not just in monetary terms, but also human costs.

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The third missing piece was that some conflict resolution mechanisms that were developed only take care of the ruling elite. There are mechanisms or systems which ensure that those who are already in power are able to maintain and manage that power, but we don't have the ability to ensure that those who are in power will share power, and will manage the diversity that we have very well. And we know that any society that is not able to sufficiently manage its diversity – whether religious, economic, class or demographic diversity – is destined to experience conflict.

What are some of the lessons learnt that we should begin to apply?

One of the lessons that we learnt is that collaborating with civil society groups [CSOs],

particularly at grassroot levels, works. It saves lives. The effectiveness of ECOWAS [the Economic Community of West African States] in the early 1990s and 2000s, for instance, was in large part due to its relationship with CSOs.

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We also have a lesson to draw from the examples of mediating mechanisms that were put in place. The experience of Kenya, for example: where the AU – through Kofi Annan – intervened, and was able to resolve the conflict.

We also need to find ways to incorporate our indigenous conflict resolution institutions and mechanisms into the continental peace and security system. For many people across the continent, the most relevant political institutions are traditional leadership structures and religious institutions.

Another lesson to be learnt is in the relationship between the AU and think tanks. These think tanks serve as a transmission belt of ideas from across the globe. My sense is that we are losing that relationship, which was built over time.

How far have we come in achieving political and economic unity on the continent?

We've come far when it comes to the level of thinking and solidarity. That's important, because societies that have a critical mass of thinkers and shared goals often go far. A critical mass of African intellectuals and policymakers are now beginning to think and do things in a united way. An example is the Africa Group in the United Nations system.

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We've also come far in terms of developing instruments: legal as well as policy frameworks. They've given us a sense of direction. Think about the sense of purpose and direction we will derive if we were able to operationalise the African Standby Force [ASF] in full and can deploy troops in that way.

We've come a long way, but we still have a lot to learn. There're several new issues that we need to put on the agenda. For instance, how do we create space for our burgeoning youth to truly participate in decision-making processes and take ownership of peace and security in their communities? How do we position ourselves in such a way that we are able to take advantage of our numerical strengths and geographical position in the global system? How do we leverage our demographic dividend, and our great ecosystems?

What are your thoughts on the recently formed Department of Political Affairs and Peace and Security (PAPS)?

The new PAPS could be a game-changer. It places the issue of peace and security right at the centre of governance. And if we solve governance problems, we solve 90% of the drivers of conflicts on the African continent. So, if you have a commissioner who is committed to the governance

agenda, then you have in place a leader who is willing to address the roots rather than the symptoms of conflicts in Africa.

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The merger also gives the AU the opportunity to bring in new blood and fresh ideas: people who are prepared to change things and move things forward. It's an opportunity for renewal in the peace, security and governance landscape.

How have we fared in terms of Silencing the Guns?

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Silencing the Guns served as a rallying cry for the governing class in Africa to consciously think about ending violence across the African continent – not just ending pockets of violence in certain areas. It has also done wonders in terms of giving the AU an ambitious target and focus to end violence. The challenge now is how to move beyond slogans and ceremonial events to keep the attention firmly glued to the broader goal of Silencing the Guns. Every event we organise should take us closer to this goal. I see Silencing the Guns as an instrument for policymakers, intellectuals etc. to spur thinking and mobilise Africans to take guns out of the hands of unauthorised people. It has been useful in highlighting that weapons are a problem in our societies. Where there are arms, it's easier to resort to violence instead of talking through issues.

Looking to the future, what should the AUC be paying attention to?

COVID-19 has taught us that we should already be putting our house in order to deal with the next pandemic. We should explore the possibility of creating health centres of excellence, where we are able to do high-end health research. If we pool resources like we are doing with the ASF, we have a chance of succeeding. Any African country that will decide to go alone may go fast, but not far.

Maritime security, and blue and green economies need to be prioritised. The other thing for us to think about seriously is managing diversity and

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inequality. The way African elites manage diversity and distribute resources will make or break the continent. African politics have to be open: the elite must find a way to share power and resources. And we need to give the youth meaningful voice, access to resources, and empower them to be agents of positive change their communities.

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