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WHO IS IN CHARGE OF AFRICA'S INTEGRATION?

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Who Is in Charge of Africa's Integration?

Africa is currently engaged in the ambitious process of transferring core elements of national sovereignty to the African Union (AU). This aggregation of sovereignties at the continental level has resulted in the establishment of authoritative institutions and a network of policy-making actors above the nation-state. Going forward, laws and decisions made by the AU are expected to supersede and, at times, nullify competing statutes, judgments, and decisions in member states.

Integrating national sovereignty into African sovereignty is potentially beneficial; however, it is also precarious. The pooling of sovereignties has real-life political and policy impacts on both national and continental outcomes.

If governed appropriately, integration could precipitate the strengthening of national sovereignties, international competitiveness of AU member states, African positions and policies regarding foreign affairs, elimination of barriers to trade, stimulation of intra-African competitive economies, continental mechanisms to correct or compensate for market failures, and improved governance, peace, and prosperity.

However, if poorly developed and governed, African integration could lead to the further weakening and fragmentation of Africa's global voice and position, erosion of the fundamentals of national economies, porous economic and political borders, and hollowing out of national political diversities and competition through shallow continental policy-making that would reduce the range of policy options on which political parties could compete.





The difference between a successful or failed African integration comes down to how well- or poorly - African integration processes are governed. Accordingly, the question of who steers African integration is integral to assessing how the integration process is managed.

Suppose that the AU is viewed and treated as an intergovernmental institution in which the centrality of member states' preferences and interests steer the integration process through political bargaining. In that case, member states will be in charge of the integration process. However, the answer is more complex if the AU is considered to be a transgovernmental or even a budding supranational institution.

The AU can be intergovernmental, transgovernmental, multi-bilateral, and supranational in ambition. At the same time, there are instances and opportunities for member states to impose their preferences and political interests through intergovernmental bargaining within the various policy organs of the Union. However, even then, the question remains what domestic factors and actors inform and influence these national preferences and political interests.

In some AU member states, several multi-level, non-hierarchical, regulatory institutions-and a hybrid mix of state actors, non-state actors, world powers, and powerful multinational corporations-interact within domestic environments that do not face the outside world as an integrated unit and are characterised by unsound fiscal management and administrative efficiency. Thus, the domestic space is highly contested; sometimes, what member states of the AU present and defend at the AU as national interests and preferences are in fact the preferences and interests of these powerful global powers and non-actors.

It is also essential to carefully examine the capacity of some AU member states to meaningfully engage with the many facets and complexities of the integration agenda. Some AU member states' African desks at the Ministries of Foreign Affairs are poorly staffed and resourced, as are some of the embassies in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. The capacity deficits of some AU member states provide opportunities for "technical support" from powerful partners and special interests groups that, in turn, impact the autonomy of the AU.



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The AU can be a transgovernmental organisation. In international relations, transgovernmentalism refers to interactions between states that are characterised by "pattern[s] of regular and purposive relations among like government units working across the borders that divide countries from one another and that demarcate the 'domestic' from the 'international.'" Thus, in a transgovernmental environment, the distinctions between national and continental, as well as between continental and geopolitical or international interests, are blurred.

Nevertheless, the AU may, arguably, be a supranational institution in the making. A supranational institution is said to be characterised by the identification and recognition of shared values and interests, the creation of effective power, and the autonomy of such power. Several institutions within the AU exercise power that mandate them to render a binding interpretation of AU instruments and determine and authorise military intervention in member states and to review their standard of governance.

It can be argued, therefore, that Africa's integration project has multiple power points. The first centre of power are the member states who are expected to exercise some steering capacity. The second and emerging centre of power is the African Union Commission (AUC). The AUC has some right of initiation and some power to execute policy, as well as serve as the guardian of the Constitutif Act and international representation of the Union. The third centre of power are the the different organs, specialised agencies, and technical institutions of the AU whose decisions and recommendations inform and influence the decisions and actions of member states.

Nevertheless, there are governance deficits at these various centers of powers. At the national level, there is a mixed picture of the governance landscape in Africa. According to the Ibrahim Mo Index of Good Governance in Africa, although some countries have made progress with regard to governance quality, there has been an overall decline in the governance quality of Africa.

While there is no index to measure the governance quality of AU organs, media reports, as well as internal and external audit reports, paint a grim picture of serious governance challenges within the different organs. In fact, the Forensic Audit Report of the Commission revealed severe financial and human resources mismanagement and serious internal weaknesses. Media reports also highlight systematic and widespread cases of sexual harassment, victimisation, and the AU's propensity to attract incompetent political and managerial staff complement.

There are considerable efforts being made to assist member states in improving governance quality at the national level. Specifically, the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights; the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance; the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights; the African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights; the African Peer Review Mechanism; and the African Governance Report are treaties, mechanisms, and tools implemented by the AU to support member states in their efforts to improve governance quality.

However, there is not enough efforts to improve governance quality of AU's organs and technical and specialised institutions. The AU reform presented a golden opportunity to address the governance deficit of AU organs and institutions; however, the reform process is unfortunately preoccupied itself more with departmental structural to reduce cost and its implementation is stuck due to structural inefficiency and recruitment ineffectiveness – two issues that the reform was meant to addressed. Additionally, the reform is still being rolled out at the AUC. Even at the African Union Commission, there remain serious questions regarding the competency of some political leaders overseeing the implementation of the reform; the labour union within the AU has declared a dispute concerning the management of the reform process.

The AU reform architects assume that sound fiscal and administrative management will result from restructuring the AUC and appointing competent political and technical leaders. However, the culture of impunity, financial impropriety, recruitment process manipulation, and dysfunctional and incoherent operating policy that reform was intended to address might be defeating the reform process.

The situation is even dire at the level of AU organs. The quality of political leadership elected by the AU to steer these organs; the competency, skillsets, and attitudes of staff recruited to work at the different secretariat of the AU organs, as well as technical and specialised institutions; and the management culture of the heads of these organs and institutions, pose significant risks to the prospect of integration success.

Ultimately, a poorly governed AUC and organs provide opportunities for the capture of Africa's integration agenda by powerful external actors, strong AU member states, or other institutional or individual interests other than the core interests of the African peoples. A poorly governed and badly administered AUC could easily behave like the 56th member state of the Union. Africans should prioritise investing in refining, enhancing, and strengthening the internal administration and governance of AU organs. One way to accomplish this is to invest in a Governance Index that regularly measures the well-being of all dimensions of Governance of the African Union Commission and the members of the African Governance Platform. Also, investing in attracting Africa's best and brightest brains to serve this continent through the AUC and the other AU organs is important.



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