The 3rd Pan-African Parliament session: 
The first teeth of a child or the roaring of tamed lion?1

by
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The Pan-African Parliament (PAP) is among the recent developments on the African continent that have generated a new sense of hope and optimism for ordinary Africans. This continental assembly flows from Article 5 of the AU’s Constitutive Act that enumerates the organs of the AU. Put in context, the PAP is seen as a critical cog on a big wheel moving Africa towards a situation of peace and security; democracy and good governance and, most importantly, development on the continent. This continental assembly stands almost in a position similar to that of the Economic, Social and Cultural Council (ECOSOCC) since both the organs are not directly linked to the AU’s executive architecture as it is the case with the Permanent Representatives Committee of Ambassadors (PRC) in Addis Ababa and the Executive Council of Ministers (EC).

Today PAP enters its fourth day of its 3rd Ordinary Session with 46 countries represented. As its President, Ambassador Gerdrude Mungella, observed last Tuesday during the official opening, the current session provides for a platform to celebrate the “1st anniversary of the existence of the PAP”, since the continental assembly was inaugurated on 18th March 2004 in Addis Ababa.

While the inaugural session was more of a ceremonial affair, mainly meant to elect the President and her four vice Presidents, deliberations at the second session were much more characteristic of a parliament. Of course, these largely had to focus on internal institutional issues pertaining to the operation of the parliament, hence the adoption of the Rules of Procedure and the election of 10 committees to handle a variety of PAP’s functions. This and advocacy work to popularise PAP were singled out by Ambassador Mungella as some of the most important achievements in PAP’s first year of existence.

Perhaps what will go down in history as the first most important decision of PAP was the resolution to send an observer mission to Darfur in Sudan. This decision sets an important precedent that the parliament will not shrink away from real challenges confronting the continent.

While the fanfare and hype that characterised the first session of PAP last September in its permanent seat, South Africa, have clearly waned, this session should be the most interesting to observe. Not only because it considers ways for ensuring the financial sustainability of PAP, but also because it will begin to answer some of the important questions raised when the idea of a continental parliament was first mooted. Key among these were: what practical impact will such a parliament have? In what way will a continental parliament promote peace, security and democracy on the ground?

Among others, the session currently afoot is considering the report of PAP’s Darfur mission; deliberating on the report of the UN High Level Panel that, inter alia, recommended the reform of the UN Security Council; considering a report on the progress made or otherwise in the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM) process and debating development issue related to the Millennium Development Goals. All these issues raise important questions relating to the impact of PAP.

On Darfur, it would not amount to being overly critical for analysts to ask: having made first-hand observations, what practically will PAP do to ameliorate the conditions of the suffering people of that troubled part of the Sudan? On the UN report, it would be fair to question: since there is already an African position on the report (the Ezulwini Consensus), is there anything new PAP can add to the position? If not, does it mean that future PAP sessions will only serve to

1 Article published in Sowetan, 5 April 2005, p.11
rubberstamp already existing decisions taken by higher AU structures? On the APRM, the end of the 3rd session must respond to the following questions: is there anything practical PAP can do to accelerate the pace of the process and, perhaps most importantly, to ensure that more states are added to the 23 that have acceded to the APRM?

Apart from immediate calls for PAP to demonstrate its relevance and significance, there are still a number of medium and long-term challenges that lie ahead of parliament. While the coming together of African parliamentarians is in itself an important unity and symbolic step, more still needs to be done to ensure that PAP is not merely a recommendation-making body at the mercy of African Heads of State and Government or just another institution to be called upon to submit opinions for consideration by a supreme executive. Perhaps the real question is: will the executive allow PAP the critical space to take positions that are sometimes radically incongruent with those held by the PRC, the EC and the AU Summit? These are among the power-relation issues that need to be dealt with if PAP is to play an oversight role that its Rules of Procedure suggests it will play.

The extent to what will Heads of State influence the composition of their country delegations to PAP is another challenge. Another more complex practical problem is the linking of membership in PAP to that of local parliaments. While it is politically not easy to de-link the two, this might curtail the independence of PAP members during discussions since whatever they say might jeopardise their political future back home. For PAP to offer an alternative voice for the people, it is important to cut the strings tying its members to their political principals.

Power relations and institutional intricacies aside, an ordinary African, tired of war in Darfur, Ivory Coast, the DRC, Somalia and elsewhere will have a question for the parliamentarians currently meeting at Gallagher Estate: what role will you play to prevent the recurrence of my ordeal in my country? Equally so, a citizen of Swaziland, Libya and perhaps an African in Zimbabwe-like countries under life leaders would like to know the relevance of PAP in bringing about democracy in his or her country? How PAP will respond to these and other practical questions will determine its significance. The future of PAP lies in its own hands.

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