Outcomes from the 37th African Union summit
Comoros exceeds expectations as AU chair
Could a new panel steer Sudan away from turmoil?
AU action to bolster elections should start at the top
Fighting the fallout of urban conflict
African Union’s 37th summit: little about a lot

The 37th African Union (AU) summit took place in Addis Ababa on 18 and 19 February 2024. As with previous summits, it brought together numerous African delegations and leaders to find answers to the pressing issues facing the continent.

Unlike previous summits, however, this year’s gathering was characterised by a cluster of urgent dynamics. These included the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and interstate tensions, the worsening Sudan crisis and demands by three Economic Community of West African States countries to exit the block.

Among many competing priorities, eighteen made it to the executive council agenda, while sixteen were discussed by the AU Assembly.

There were also calls for clarity following the AU’s admission to the G20 and ongoing discussions on the outcome of United Nations Security Council Resolution 2719. Of the many priorities, 18 made it to the executive council agenda, while 16 were discussed by the AU Assembly.

Clarifying the AU’s G20 engagements

The discourse following the AU’s G20 admission initially focused solely on its significance and the AU’s rise as an independent international actor. This has now moved to a deeper examination of what tangible contributions the AU brings to the table, given the specialised role of the platform. Consequently, the summit needed to address the need for clear

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**Acronyms and abbreviations**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acronym</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACDEG</td>
<td>African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance</td>
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<tr>
<td>AfCFTA</td>
<td>African Continental Free-trade Area</td>
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<td>AU</td>
<td>African Union</td>
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<td>DRC</td>
<td>Democratic Republic of Congo</td>
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<td>IGAD</td>
<td>Intergovernmental Authority on Development</td>
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<td>IHL</td>
<td>International humanitarian law</td>
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<td>JFCHPI</td>
<td>Joint Framework on Coordination and Harmonisation of Peace Initiative</td>
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<td>POC</td>
<td>Protection of civilians</td>
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<td>PSC</td>
<td>Peace and Security Council</td>
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<td>PSOs</td>
<td>Peace support operations</td>
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<td>RSF</td>
<td>Rapid Support Forces</td>
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<td>SAF</td>
<td>Sudanese Armed Forces</td>
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<td>UN</td>
<td>United Nations</td>
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engagement mechanisms and how the AU will optimise its membership to advance the interests of Africa.

The summit provided clarity on these issues in two ways. First, it addressed representation by establishing structures for organising African positions and technical engagements. It was decided that the AU chairperson, assisted by the chair of the AU Commission, represent the AU at the leaders’ summit. Additionally, the executive council chairs for technical portfolios are to be accompanied by appropriate commissioners (Chart 1).

Chart 2: Named priority areas for AU G20 engagement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Accelerating implementation of Agenda 2063</th>
<th>Intensifying advocacy towards reform of the international financial architecture, debt restructuring</th>
<th>Increasing agricultural outputs towards food security</th>
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<th>Advocating energy transition</th>
<th>Enhancing trade and attracting investments to support the African Continental Free Trade Area</th>
<th>Improving Africa’s credit rating to boost investment, health and vaccine manufacturing</th>
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Current PSC Chairperson

HE Mohammed Arrouchi,
Morocco’s Ambassador to Ethiopia and Permanent Representative to the African Union.

PSC members

Burundi, Cameroon, Republic of Congo, Djibouti, The Gambia, Ghana, Morocco, Namibia, Nigeria, Senegal, South Africa, Tanzania, Tunisia, Uganda, Zimbabwe
These high-level structures will be supported by a sherpa and sous-sherpa to coordinate technical component efforts, and the AU Commission and the AU chair in formulating common African positions. The summit also addressed six priorities for shaping and funding Africa’s engagements. These outcomes provide clarity and guidance for partner engagements and establish clear entry points for actors involved in programming around the AU’s G20 membership.

**Bringing order to leadership changes**

As the tenure of AU Commission Chairperson Moussa Faki nears its end, competition for his successor intensifies. Pre-summit, there was uncertainty about which region would be next, although speculation went the way of East Africa. In line with the 2018 AU Assembly decision, the summit discussed maintaining inter- and intraregional representation based on English alphabetical order. Discussions also highlighted the implications of the format in determining regions’ eligibility to nominate candidates for specific positions in the next elections.

**New PSC members**

The summit also saw the inclusion of new members in the Peace and Security Council (PSC). Ghana, Senegal, South Africa, Zimbabwe, Tunisia and the Republic of the Congo exited the Council, but Côte d’Ivoire, Sierra Leone, Egypt, Angola, DRC and Botswana joined. Doubts are being raised about whether this new composition can rejuvenate a council that has come under extreme pressure in the last couple of years through the changing nature of continental threats.

But the inclusion of DRC, for example, may hinder the tabling of the eastern DRC crisis for Council deliberations. This is unless the country prioritises the use of the Council to address the international dimension of the crisis.

With these new entrants, the PSC is dominated by ‘small states’. Whether this will be a weakness is yet to be seen, but it depends on new members’ priorities. What is clear, however, is that filling the Council with embattled states makes it difficult to discuss these countries unless other countries dare to lead such discussions at the risk of bilateral tensions.

**Failed reform or opportunity for renewal?**

At the summit, the leadership of AU reform changed from President Paul Kagame to President William Ruto. While it is still not clear how Kagame’s successor was decided, Ruto’s raving criticism of the AU’s inability to fund itself after decades of independence suggests he might have some new ideas. In his final report to the AU Assembly, Kagame pointed to the need for member states to address political will to improve the AU.

The new champion’s work is, thus, cut out for him as the implementation of most AU reform milestones rely on the political will of his peers. The process faces considerable obstacles, not least resistance by member states, and the change of guards will bring new perspectives to the table but likely no change in outcomes.

**Summit of little about many crises**

Despite many peace and security issues, only Libya was tabled as a major issue for discussion. Many other crises were lumped together in the annual statutory state of peace and security report. For many concerned about Sudan and similar situations, the attention on crises was inadequate and not commensurate with the
enormity of threats. Most significant were the DRC mini-summit that took place on the summit’s sidelines and the prominence of pronouncements on the Gaza war.

However, although both Kagame and President Felix Tshisekedi were in the same room, the summit failed to move beyond expression of hard stands, tough talks and trading of blame between the neighbours. The mini-summit, however, opened the lid covering the simmering tensions between the two. Short of swift regional action to de-escalate the situation, there is heightened risk of deterioration with major consequences for the region and the eastern DRC crisis.

Enhancing summit effectiveness

The summit failed to provide definitive leadership on crisis management. This leaves the continent questioning when the DRC, Sudan and Sahel crises will receive the high-level attention they deserve and what the AU Assembly should focus on amid competing interests. For many Africans, the increasing lack of strong leadership on crisis handling suggests a fatigue in conflict management or a waning of the search for stability in the context of ‘the Africa we want’ ideal.

The summit raised further questions as to when the DRC, Sudan and Sahel crises will receive the high-level attention they deserve?

Low participation of heads of state is another reality to be improved if the summits are to be effective. An Institute for Security Studies seminar revealed that 26 heads of state, six prime ministers, seven vice presidents, seven foreign ministers, five non-African delegations and 14 international organisations participated in 37th summit.

The absence of many heads of state raised questions as to whether Africa’s leaders are giving its many challenges the needed attention. Is apathy emerging among even heads of state, especially when those leaders often attend meetings organised by other partners?

Furthermore, most heads of state fly back to their capitals by the end of day one of the summit. Members of Africa’s apex decision-making body, the AU Assembly, should, at the barest minimum, participate in an annual two-day decision-making meeting. Instead, it has become the norm that summit sessions, which often run late into the night, are often attended by ambassadors rather than presidents. This delays decision-making, resulting in late finalisation of summit outcomes.

Many argue that ambassadors or foreign ministers sitting in for their heads of state does not imply a lack of participation. However, given Africa’s desperate need to manage several peace, security and governance issues, the presence of heads of state symbolises seriousness and commitment to addressing issues of prime concern to Africa’s citizens.
Comoros defeats the odds at the helm of the African Union

Comoros’ candidacy and subsequent election as AU chair occurred during the 36th AU summit in February 2023. Coming after the leadership of Senegal, the country’s election brought a lengthy debate about the capacity of ‘small’ states to drive a continental agenda and maintain progress. Some experts expressed concerns about their limited economic and diplomatic clout. Others argued that the chair’s ability to mobilise member states around continental issues and drive collective initiatives was more important.

Since rotational AU chairship was enshrined in Article 6(4) of the AU Constitutive Act 2000, it has garnered interest among member states, leading to thorough scrutiny of the achievements of elected chairs. Comoros’ chairship offered another opportunity to assess the capacity of small states to advance their declared cause in Africa’s diplomatic spaces.

Comoros’ priorities

As has become the norm, AU chairs openly define the priorities for their tenures. Comoros outlined its areas of focus during the 36th AU summit, differing from Egypt, which opted to announce its plans ahead of the 2019 summit. A late announcement of priorities is not always a serious concern, given that it may sometimes result from a late official announcement of chairs. Yet, such delays frequently create a perception of unpreparedness and lack of seriousness among policymakers, experts, and the general public.

President Azali Assoumani’s speech during the previous summit outlined seven priorities. These were continental peace and security, multilateralism, accelerating the African Continental Free-trade Area (AfCFTA), women’s empowerment, climate change, food security and Africa’s digitalisation. It was almost a continuation of Senegal’s chairship, as most of the priorities of the two chairs were similar. This is a commendable effort at continuity, given that chairs should contribute to long-term goals in line with the aspirations of Agenda 2063.

Unlike other chairs, however, Comoros saw an opportunity to amplify island states’ voices in addressing rising sea levels and blue economy issues. It also tabled Africa’s digitalisation instead of its debts and recovery of artefacts (see Chart 3).

Comoros’ approach

Comoros opted for advocacy through conference diplomacy. It convened a three-day ministerial meeting titled ‘The blue economy and climate action in Africa: island and coastal states at the forefront’. Held in the capital Moroni from 12 to 14 June 2023, it aimed to raise awareness among policymakers of the potential that the

Chart 3: Priorities of the preceding AU chairs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Senegal</th>
<th>Comoros</th>
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<tr>
<td>Enhancing peace and security in Africa</td>
<td>Enhancing peace and security in Africa</td>
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<tr>
<td>Africa’s global positioning/multilateralism</td>
<td>Africa’s global positioning/multilateralism</td>
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<tr>
<td>Completing the AU reform</td>
<td>Accelerating AfCFTA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women and youth empowerment</td>
<td>Women and youth empowerment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enhancing Africa’s economy and health security</td>
<td>The blue economy and climate change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food security and climate change</td>
<td>Food security</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dealing with African states’ foreign debt and recovering assets and artefacts stolen or diverted during colonisation</td>
<td>Africa’s digitalisation</td>
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President Azali Assoumani’s speech during the 36th summit outlined seven priorities.
blue economy holds for island states and the continent at large.

In addition, Assoumani led the AU delegations in several Africa+1 summits, such as the 2023 Russia-Africa and Saudi-Africa events in Moscow and Riyadh, respectively. Africa’s participation had multiple objectives, but enhancing food security and development stood out.

The AU chair, pursuing his conference diplomacy and good offices, voiced, with other African leaders, the continent’s demand for robust financing for climate adaptation at COP28 in Dubai last year. Similarly, he convened the quadripartite summit to address the protracted crisis in the Great Lakes region and made significant efforts to enhance ratification of the AfCFTA agreement.

**Exceeding expectations**

Comoros’ results as AU chair were considerable. The country’s advocacy contributed significantly to the AU’s admission as a permanent G20 member in September 2023. Despite Senegal’s gains in securing the AU’s G20 seat, 12 prominent members were still reluctant to facilitate the admission. The chair personally lobbied resisting states through good offices over months and finally secured the seat.

The above-mentioned ministerial meeting gave birth to the Moroni Declaration for Ocean and Climate Action in Africa, underlining the shared vision of harnessing the continent’s blue economy. The declaration acknowledged the challenge island states face in confronting climate change. It called for an increased partnership to champion the blue economy and support the Great Blue Wall Initiative for sustainability and regeneration.

The declaration is crucial for two reasons. First, it serves as an African shared vision of the blue economy and an instrument that could help the continent mobilise partners to support Africa’s climate financing. Secondly, it will raise awareness among African leaders on the potential of blue economy.

Comoros also advanced talks during the second Russia-Africa summit, resulting in the shipment of 200 000 tons of grain to six African countries in November 2023, thus enhancing food security. The Saudi-Africa summit saw several commitments from the Saudi Crown Prince to support development initiatives in Africa. Comoros lobbied peers to ratify the AfCFTA agreement which resulted in an additional ratification after February 2023.

Furthermore, it assisted the quadripartite conference on the Great Lakes region to adopt the Joint Framework on Coordination and Harmonisation of Peace Initiatives (JFCHPI) in Eastern DRC. It also endorsed the establishment of a multilevel coordination working group.

However, the country’s footprints were minimal, especially regarding peace and security and climate change. The chair and the entire AU failed to address burning cases such as Sudan, the protracted Sahel crisis and emerging threats to regional integration efforts in West Africa. In addition, conference diplomacy did not generate much beyond the Moroni declaration, the JFCHPI and the multi-level working group on Eastern DRC.

**Gaps and challenges**

Despite commendable achievements, Comoros faced multiple challenges, foremost among them its limited financial capacity. The financial burden and the absence of a budget dedicated to chairs meant that Comoros had to bear additional costs despite domestic financial constraints.

The AU could contribute 20% to 30% to the bureau’s budget to assist the chair

The country budgeted US$11 million for its chairship, a considerable amount for a state with limited resources. This engendered an over-reliance on external partners such as France amid the AU’s push to own its initiatives. In response, policymakers proposed that the AU contribute at least 20% to 30% to the bureau’s budget.

The second was Comoros’ internal pre-electoral political context in 2023, with Assoumani running for a third consecutive term. Ongoing contestations following his re-election on 14 January 2024 indicate that the chair had to deal with fierce political contestation back home. Thus, he was overstretched between national and continental challenges.
The third was a limping bureau beset by struggles between Morocco and Algeria over the 2024 chairship. Chairing the AU should be a collective bureau-led effort comprising, among others, the outgoing, incumbent and incoming chairs – the troika. Without prejudicing bureau members such as Senegal, the absence of a deputy, Morocco or Algeria, deprived Comoros of essential support. This could have strengthened diplomatic clout and helped the chair deliver better.

By being active and determined in driving affairs, Comoros achieved results, challenging those who predicted its failure.

Another issue was discord with countries in post-coup transition, especially Mali and Burkina Faso, during the Russia-Africa summit in July 2023. Sticking to the AU anti-coup norms, the AU and AUC chairs and some member states declined a ‘family’ picture with the de facto authorities of Burkina Faso and Mali.

In reprisal, the two denied the AU chair access to their territories, preventing monitoring missions in August 2023. Due to their perception of Comoros as a ‘small’ state, transitional leaders Traoré and Goita responded strongly to deny officials in Moroni access which in turn hampered Comoros’ plan to contribute to successful post-coup transitions and counter-terrorism.

**Chair’s commitment**

Despite numerous challenges including limited economic capacity and diplomatic clout, Comoros gained support from peers and partners to drive continental affairs. A significant lesson learnt is the equal importance of economic and diplomatic muscle at the AU helm and the chair’s commitment and determination. By being active and determined in driving affairs, the country achieved results, challenging observers who predicted its failure.

This proves that any member state can drive the AU irrespective of its size and economic and diplomatic capacities, should it show sufficient determination and ability to create synergy on issues of common interest. Limping bureaus have been the Achilles’ heel of the last two chairs. The consequences seemed more pronounced during 2023, given PSC sources’ assertions that Comoros could have achieved more with a completely composed bureau.

The AU Assembly, therefore, should vote to elect a deputy in the absence of regional consensus. In addition, the AU should develop robust financial support mechanisms and strengthen Articles 15 and 16 of the AU Assembly rules of procedure to clarify criteria guiding chair elections and bureau roles. Given the demanding nature of the chairship and the continent’s challenges, chairs should be strongly supported by peers and the AU.
Could a new panel steer Sudan away from turmoil?

The conflict between Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) led by General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) of General Mohamed Hamdan ‘Hemedti’ Dagalo has entered its 11th month. Given the sheer number of fatalities, humanitarian outlook and regional implications, this fighting over control of the country is arguably the continent’s worst internal conflict.

Despite Sudan’s immediate neighbours hosting displaced people, the humanitarian outlook remains dire. It has caused more than 12 000 deaths and the largest displacement crisis in the country’s history. At least 10 million people have fled their homes and around 25 million – about half the population – need humanitarian assistance and protection.

The panel is to work with all civilian forces, military belligerents and regional and global actors such as the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), United Nations (UN) and League of Arab States. It will ‘ensure an all-inclusive process towards the swift restoration of peace, constitutional order and stability in Sudan’.

However, given the AU’s approach to the crisis and recent developments, many doubt whether the panel can move the needle closer to ending the war in a complex context. Other AU and development partner efforts have largely failed.

AU barely visible

The panel’s appointment is crucial as the dynamics in the country and the war itself have become more dangerous and complex amid the AU’s legitimacy crisis and approach to peace and security. The Roadmap for the Resolution of the Conflict in Sudan and related efforts have not significantly shifted the war’s course. Rather, they have increased concerns about AU commitment and capacity to promote peace, security and stability not only in Sudan but across the continent.

The AU PSC has held numerous meetings on the situation. The Council has repeatedly condemned ongoing fighting, called for immediate ceasefire and promoted inclusive dialogue and a peaceful solution. It has also urged the AU Commission Chairperson to continue engaging warring parties to these ends.

For its part, the AU Commission spearheaded the development of a roadmap that was adopted by the PSC at its 1 156th meeting of heads of state and government. It also established an expanded mechanism on Sudan and a core group to harmonise efforts by all actors to contain the situation.

Questions have been raised about the AU’s ability to end the war in line with its mandate to promote continental peace and stability. To lead stabilisation efforts, AU Commission Chairperson Moussa Faki appointed a high-level, ad-hoc panel on Sudan consisting of Mohamed Ibn Chambas, Speciosa Wandira-Kazibwe and Francisco Madeira.

The war has also reignited hostilities in traditionally unstable, restive parts of the country, particularly Darfur and Kordofan. Altogether, the situation jeopardises stability in the already-volatile Horn of Africa and central Africa regions.

Diplomatic efforts are in disarray, with ongoing peace efforts largely uncoordinated, bureaucratic, elitist and focused on gun-wielding belligerents much to the exclusion of civilian representatives, complicating prospects for an inclusive political transition. The strategic role urged by neighbouring states has come under heavy scrutiny after Hemedti was warmly received between December 2023 and January 2024 in Rwanda, South Africa, Uganda, Kenya, Djibouti and Ethiopia.

Peace efforts are uncoordinated, bureaucratic, elitist and focused on gun-wielding belligerents

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While these efforts indicate the AU’s continuous strategic engagement on Sudan, they have not led to concrete engagements with Sudanese partners nor a reduction in combat between the warring parties. The most significant effort to date has been the Jeddah process driven largely by external partners and co-facilitated by the AU and IGAD.
Notwithstanding this process, and with the limited contribution of the AU, the conflict has continued to worsen to the point at which Sudan's future is becoming increasingly uncertain.

**A long rope to pull**

In this chequered context, appointing the panel to fulfil the request outlined in the PSC’s 1 156th and 1 185th meetings gives the AU an opportunity to re-engage Sudanese stakeholders to ensure more robust continental involvement and progress in containing the situation.

The panel brings several strengths to a complex task. With members from three African regions, it maximises regional diversity and addresses perceptions of a lack of neutrality among Horn of Africa actors. This has increased the potential for Sudanese reception and optimism about what the panel could achieve.

Secondly, the extensive experience of the chair on Sudan issues – having been head of the AU-UN Mission in Darfur – increases the panel’s understanding of the complexities of the crisis.

**Does the panel have the political muscle to bring warring parties to the negotiating table?**

However, diplomats and observers question the panel’s political muscle to bring warring generals to the negotiating table. Some analysts told PSC Report that it is merely another among existing AU attempts to appear to be doing something. An Addis-based diplomat opined that the panel’s weight and convening power could have been enhanced with the inclusion of a sitting or retired head of state.

Others expect worrying developments to complicate mandate delivery. The battle for supremacy between warring generals and their military factions is dimming peace prospects. Sudan’s withdrawal from IGAD, SAF’s decision to leave talks and stage more offensives against RSF, and recent RSF military advances in Wad Madani, Khartoum, and western Darfur could also frustrate panel efforts. Hemdidi’s reception by certain African countries could spur Burhan to question African-led efforts such as the panel’s work.

The Addis Ababa declaration signed in January between former prime minister Hamdok’s Coordination of Civilian Democratic Forces (‘Taqaddum’) and RSF further dashes prospects for the panel’s work with the warring parties. While it proposes a roadmap for peace, its sidelining of SAF could easily be interpreted as a de facto legitimisation of RSF amid intense contestation by both factions.

**Achieving impact**

The panel is a crucial AU-led effort to find a political solution to the Sudanese war, but it requires financial and political support from the AU Commission, AU partners and all stakeholders. This will help it achieve the regional consensus needed to engage with regional and international actors to bring generals and their factions to the table for a comprehensive ceasefire.

Its constitution is timely given Burhan’s resistance against IGAD and objection to talks with Hemditi. The panel, with other actors, should seize any opportunity signalling a willingness to talk through quiet diplomacy with both generals to renegotiate conditions for a resolution. It should seek to engage high-level stakeholders rather than rely on proxies and representatives.

It could also leverage AU convening power to include broader Sudanese stakeholders to engage spoilers and funders of factions.

The AU, through the panel and IGAD, should push for civilian participation in the Jeddah talks and focus not only on ceasefire negotiations and humanitarian assistance but on discussions on political issues. Including civilian and political groups could provide a transitional government architecture and implementation plan based on the aspirations of the Sudanese people and avoid repeating past mistakes.

The Addis Ababa declaration could review the Juba peace agreement, considering the interests of warring actors and civilian and political groups.

The outcomes of the talks must be a stable and democratic Sudan that its citizens dared to visualise and on which most are not prepared to give up yet.
AU action to bolster elections should start at the top

Twenty-one African countries are expected to hold elections in 2024, according to the African Union’s (AU) calendar. Already, the first two scheduled polls in Comoros and Senegal – which each held the last two AU chairships – have been marred by irregularities.

Voter apathy characterised the presidential and island assemblies election in Comoros, where President Azali Assoumani’s victory – based on a paltry 16.3% voter turnout – was disputed by the opposition, who alleged ballot rigging.

In Senegal, President Macky Sall’s domination of the electoral process and postponement of the polls initially scheduled for February, were met with widespread protest in a traditionally stable state. Although the Constitutional Council has overturned the postponement and elections are now set for 24 March, Sall’s tampering with the process jeopardised the credibility of the polls and increased the likelihood of electoral violence.

Both instances suggest that AU member states don’t respect the principles and norms of the organisation they are members of, and in Comoros and Senegal’s cases, have recently led. As immediate past AU chairs, countries at the helm of the union should be setting a better electoral example.

Other than rotating among Africa’s regions, there are no selection criteria for choosing the AU chair. Even so, an unwritten rule is that the chair must comply with and foster the organisation’s norms and principles. When AU chairs conduct poor elections in their own countries, does this misgovernance at the top trickle down?

Africa’s electoral landscape

Africa’s electoral landscape is now characterised by voter apathy, mistrust in election management bodies and destructive power contestation among political elites. Elections in 2023 highlighted a reversal of the democratic gains made in countries such as Liberia and Sierra Leone.

Prime examples were the polls in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Zimbabwe, which witnessed sustained voter suppression amid a persistent loss of confidence in the electoral process. Since 2011, African citizens’ support for the ballot box has dwindled by an average of eight percentage points across 29 African countries.

Although the delivery of free and fair elections is the responsibility of member states, the AU and regional economic communities can influence election quality at a supranational level. A tripartite relationship exists between the AU Commission, AU chair and member states, requiring all parties to respect and enforce instruments such as the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance. Have all three arms fallen short on electoral norm enforcement, and if so, how can this be fixed?

The implication of the AU chair

The choice of AU chair is likely to have a bearing on how member states and incumbents running for re-election perceive the AU’s role and influence on polls...
and good governance more broadly. So far, the electoral record of several African governments chairing the AU is questionable.

Apart from the recent Senegal and Comoros cases, Egypt – while serving as the 2019–20 AU chair – implemented electoral reforms against the spirit of AU norms and values. Egypt’s Constitution was amended to allow third terms, and the presidential term limit was extended from four to six years. The reforms allowed President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi to stand for a third term in the December 2023 elections and extend his stay in power until 2030.

The 2024–25 AU Chair, Mauritania, will hold presidential and senate elections in June this year. The country has a history of military coups, and only experienced its first peaceful transfer of power in 2019. It now faces a litmus test to determine whether its path towards democratic consolidation can be maintained. Mauritania’s electoral process should be closely watched, as it could have implications both domestically and across Africa.

Enhancing electoral governance reporting

Although the AU prides itself on the principle of non-indifference, a chasm exists between AU norms and the practice of its member states – and the gap is widening when it comes to the conduct of elections.

Irregularities during Comoros’ elections – while its president chaired the AU – were a prime reflection of how many African countries and the AU Commission undertake, observe and report on polls. The commission congratulated Assoumani on his re-election, approving the results and the electoral process, and calling for dialogue to ease political divisions. This is despite the meager voter turnout and widespread local rejection of the outcome.

Countries must improve their reporting on progress in implementing AU instruments like the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance (ACDEG). Only Rwanda and Togo have so far submitted reports. This process is a key tool that allows the AU’s Department of Political Affairs, Peace and Security and member states to assess electoral and governance performance.

More sober assessments by AU election observer missions are also needed. The AU Commission’s elections report to the Peace and Security Council on 24 January highlighted challenges and painted a worrying outlook for 2024 polls. This comes amid mounting criticism from civil society and opposition parties that the AU rubberstamps elections.

The AU Commission’s report is a positive step, but more stringent enforcement mechanisms are needed to ensure compliance with its recommendations. One measure could be to use the implementation rate of previous observer missions’ recommendations to determine whether future missions are sent.

Selection of the AU chair should also be guided by the extent to which the nominated member state complies with the organisation's instruments on governance, peace and security. The history and pattern of governance in a country should be considered when selecting the AU chair.
Fighting the fallout of urban conflict

The Centre for Civilians in Conflict Interim Executive Director Udo Jude Ilo provides insights on steps to address the suffering of civilians caught up in warfare.

Civilians have borne the brunt of urban warfare in Ukraine, Sudan and, most recently, Gaza. What humanitarian and human rights law mechanisms and tools could ease the suffering?

This is an important question given the increased number of armed urban conflicts. Today, an estimated 50 million people are affected by urban warfare and the prevalence of these wars is likely to continue to grow as populations increasingly congregate in urban areas.

As in any armed conflicts, adherence to international humanitarian law (IHL) and international human rights law is of utmost importance. Because of the inherent challenges of urban fighting, applying the principles of distinction, proportionality and precautions to the conduct of hostilities is crucial, meaning life or death for civilians.

Based on our experience of conflicts, we know that collecting data and information about how civilians are harmed can help the military rapidly adjust tactics and rules of engagement to avoid further devastation.

Tracking mechanisms that systematically record and analyse can also help prevent, mitigate and respond to civilian harm. Armed actors need to understand how their hostilities affect people. This is especially relevant in urban spaces where combatants and civilians are often in close proximity and where reverberating effects from violence directly or indirectly threaten the population.

Armed actors should proactively obtain and use information on how civilians are harmed so that their assessments of proportionality and precautions are better informed. When such mechanisms are applied meaningfully, they can inform commanders timeously on where and how civilians are affected and reduce risks.

The Centre for Civilians in Conflict also advocates better understanding and integrating the perspectives of affected civilians in military operational planning and response to civilian harm. It has facilitated dialogues between civilian communities and militaries whenever and wherever possible. Civilians also have their own self-protection mechanisms, which are crucial to understand if they are to be strengthened and supported.

A protection of civilians (POC) mandate is outlined in the African Standby Force (ASF) doctrine. What is needed to deploy the ASF and in what conflicts?

Unfortunately, in many recent conflicts, IHL principles have been flouted. This is clearly indicated in the number of civilian casualties in Gaza, Sudan and Ukraine and the complete destruction of civilian infrastructure, including hospitals and schools.

In addition to adherence to humanitarian laws, militaries and conflicting parties should prevent and mitigate civilian harm. Processes include adequately training armed forces to protect urban dwellers, understanding the urban landscape, and mapping and assessing in advance the risk military operations might pose to civilians and infrastructure. In addition, ways should be sought to distance combat from populated areas. Such considerations should be taken in all aspects of training for, planning and conducting urban military operations.

Militaries and conflicting parties should undertake to prevent and mitigate civilian harm

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The ASF could be a key mechanism for addressing the continent’s peace and security threats while ensuring civilian protection. The AU previously deployed stabilisation missions, but ad hoc and with security arrangements that did not necessarily reflect the principles envisaged in the original ASF make-up and authorisation processes. These deployments did not follow the ASF mandate and deployment timelines nor any AU-set joint and coherent agreements.
Deployments have included the East African Community Regional Force in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo in November 2021 to help restore peace and stability. Earlier in 2021, Rwanda and the Southern African Development Community states sent two separate missions to northern Mozambique that were endorsed by the AU only after deployment. Similar ad-hoc arrangements were made in G5 Sahel.

It is imperative to use the ASF to achieve a common doctrine and strategy to guide new missions and operations conducted by regional economic communities and mechanisms. Standardised training on civilian protection is key. This includes strengthening intelligence capabilities, promoting collaboration with humanitarian agencies and establishing a clear legal framework for ASF engagement in conflicts. ASF operations should be tailored to specific conflicts, aligning interventions with local needs and international standards.

Peacekeeping and peace support operations (PSOs) have been rejected, notably in Mali and the Democratic Republic of Congo for failure to ensure civilian security and engender legitimacy and credibility from local communities. How should continental and regional organisations such as the AU and UN mitigate such challenges?

The responsibility to protect civilians rests primarily with the host state. The UN deploys peacekeeping missions to support host states and protect civilians within their capabilities. Many failures to protect civilians relate to inadequate resources from troop-contributing countries or financial contributors. To mitigate the rejection of peacekeeping operations by the populations they are mandated to protect, the AU and UN must prioritise community engagement and local ownership. Integrating local perspectives into mission planning, improving accountability mechanisms and adapting strategies to changing conflict dynamics are essential. Continuous evaluation, improvement and transparent communication can build trust and credibility in peacekeeping operations.

However, missions are not designed or resourced to address fully most problems facing host governments and populations. Truly tackling the causes of conflict, reaching or implementing peace agreements and building the capacity of host governments to protect civilians all depend on international and regional actors other than peacekeeping missions. So greater unity is needed among these actors to back missions diplomatically and financially.

The UN can learn from the AU or regional African missions that have instituted civilian harm tracking and analysis mechanisms. UN peacekeeping is still developing its understanding of and doctrine on civilian harm mitigation, while this is central in AU policy.

The AU and UN should prioritise community engagement and local ownership to mitigate the rejection of peace missions.

Effective civilian harm-tracking tools and mitigations are needed to strengthen mandate delivery while minimising risk. They also help manage reputational risk associated with causing unintentional harm or foregoing operations through inadequate understanding or mitigation of risks.

In April 2023, the 15th ordinary meeting of the Specialised Technical Committee of Defence, Safety and Security adopted the Policy on POC in PSOs. What is the significance of this policy?

The policy provides a clear framework for AU PSOs to prioritise and implement civilian protection strategies. Its implementation can improve accountability, promote compliance with international norms and enhance the effectiveness of AU operations. The policy recognises that the PSC has committed that all PSOs will have a POC mandate.

This will require mandating future PSOs and putting in place all the capacities, structures and mechanisms needed for implementation. The AU needs to rely not only on its members but on international actors, particularly through the UN, which has two decades of civilian protection experience.

An AU innovation and improvement over the UN’s policy is that PSO mission-level strategies for civilian protection are developed with stakeholders including local communities. This is an opportunity to include civil society early on in strategic planning and to truly incorporate civil society partners in implementation.
The PSC recently called for a review of the African Peace and Security Architecture. How can the POC mandate be better mainstreamed into the AU’s peace spectrum?

It requires a comprehensive approach including incorporating protection measures into peacebuilding initiatives, strengthening early warning systems and ensuring that peace agreements explicitly address civilian rights and safety. Regular assessments and adjustments to the African Peace and Security Architecture can enable a more proactive and responsive framework.

The AU’s policy defines four protection ‘pillars’ similar to the UN’s three peacekeeping protection ‘tiers’. It is understood that protection is not about just force but about dialogue and implementing programmes. However, peacekeeping and peace support operations face the challenge of truly integrating protection activities by all components under a civilian-led, politically focused, whole-of-mission strategy. Coordination, capacity building and sharing best practices between AU and UN can contribute to mainstreaming protection through various responses to peace and security challenges.
About the PSC Report

The Peace and Security Council Report analyses developments and decisions at the African Union Peace and Security Council (PSC). The monthly publication is the only one of its kind dedicated to providing current analysis of the PSC’s work. It is written by a team of ISS analysts in Addis Ababa.

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The Institute for Security Studies (ISS) partners to build knowledge and skills that secure Africa’s future. Our goal is to enhance human security as a means to achieve sustainable peace and prosperity. Using its networks and influence, the ISS provides timely and credible analysis, practical training and technical assistance to governments and civil society.

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