

Special EDITION

The African Union Commission Chair Elections; Examining Kenya's Previous Bid and the Prospects for Victory

January 2025

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Executive Summary

Kenya's renewed bid for the African Union Commission (AUC) chairmanship through the candidacy of opposition leader Raila Odinga, has set the Kenyan government on the limelight once again, owing to intensive lobbying across the continent. The AUC chair is a crucial position tasked with overseeing the African Union Commission's operations and shaping its policies. This paper delves into Kenya's past strategies while unveiling the new approaches being employed in its renewed pursuit of the position. Odinga's manifesto is briefly analyzed alongside that of his formidable competitor, Djibouti's Mohamoud Youssouf. The paper emphasizes the importance of strategic diplomacy and leveraging the SADC bloc among other strategies. Challenges to Odinga's candidacy, including his age and the dynamics within regional alliances, are discussed, along with recommendations for strengthening Kenya's position.

Introduction

The African Union Commission (AUC) chair, a position that Kenya's former Foreign Affairs Cabinet Secretary Amina Mohammed once vied for in 2017, is once again attracting regional attention and sparking lively discussions in the country in the wake of President William Ruto's endorsement of Kenya's opposition leader, Raila Odinga, for the position (Huaxia, 2024). The AUC chair is the head of the commission, which is the secretariat of the African Union (AU), an organ tasked with running the union's day to day operations. Duties of the chair range from administration of the commission, representation, to promotion of the union's interests within and outside the continent. Generally, the chairperson plays a pivotal role in shaping the policies and direction of the AU alongside representing the interests of the member states on the global stage (Tieku, 2021).


The AUC chair is elected by the AU Assembly (comprises of heads of state and government) for a four-year term, which is renewable once. Election of the chair is done



alongside that of the deputy and is achieved through a two-thirds majority consensus of member states (Ngeno, 2024). Since the reconstitution of the AU in 2002, representatives from the Western, Southern and Central Africa regions have respectively served in the position of chair. Owing to the AU's principle of regional rotation, the next chair is scheduled to come from the Eastern Africa region (Union, n.d.)

Kenya's Previous Bid for the Position

In 2017, Amina's candidacy was perceived as a strong one considering her credentials, which included serving in various departments in the Ministry of foreign affairs as director, Permanent Representative to the UN (2000-2006), chair of the World Trade Organization's General Council (2005) and ultimately Kenya's Cabinet Secretary for Foreign Affairs (2013-2018). In light of her aforementioned credentials, Kenya embarked on a continental mission of promoting her as the ideal candidate for the position (African, Kenya nominates Amina Mohamed for AU chair

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The multifaceted approach drew million from the exchequer in Kenya

job, 2016). Kenya's campaign strategy was multifaceted, involving in-person high-level diplomatic engagements accompanied by leveraging on regional bodies and alliances. The multifaceted approach drew Ksh 437.7 million from the exchequer in Kenya, a figure that was Ksh 51 million more than the initial amount budgeted for the campaign (Nation, Sh437m spent in campaigns for AU chairman's job, 2019). Despite Amina's impressive credentials and the large sum of money spent towards the campaign, she lost to Chad's Mahamat Moussa Faki. Moussa Faki previously served as Chad's Prime Minister (2003-2005), Minister for Foreign Affairs (2008-2017), chair of the AU Peace and Security Council (September 2013) and chair of the UN Security Council (December 2015). Prior to his election, Faki had been involved in the formation of AU's maritime policy, several counter-terrorism initiatives and in the South Sudan Peace process (Union, 2024).



Former Kenya's Foreign Affairs Cabinet Secretary, Hon. Amina C. Mohammed Ph.D. (Photo Credit: African Union Media)

In a closely contested race during the voting process, Amina took an early lead during the first voting round with 16 votes, edging out Moussa Faki, who secured 14. The remaining votes were scattered among other candidates, leaving no contender with the two-thirds majority required for victory. What followed was a dramatic series of seven rounds of voting. With each round, tensions mounted and alliances shifted, until Faki ultimately

triumphed with an impressive 38 votes, clinching the AUC chair position (African, 2017).



AU Chair debate in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, 2017 (Photo Credit: African Union Media)

Several factors come into play when analysing Kenya's failed bid for the AUC chair position. While the Government of Kenya made the valiant effort of attempting to appoint a task force, this task force was largely perceived as lacking in experience. The taskforce was led by Dr. Fred Matiang'i, then a Minister for Internal Affairs, and composed largely of politicians with limited diplomatic experience. Analysts argue that Kenya's reliance on politically motivated appointments, rather than experienced foreign service officers or seasoned diplomats, created a disconnect between the country's diplomatic needs and the personnel selected for the role. This approach contrasted with the expectation that diplomats with extensive experience in foreign relations and diplomacy would handle the critical campaign (Monda, 2024). Another major hurdle that Kenya faced in its bid was the lack of sufficient backing from the East African Community (EAC), a critical regional bloc. Reflecting on the outcome during her concession speech, Amina expressed disappointment, noting that Kenya's neighbours had let her down. She emphasized the need for Kenya to reassess its alliances and re-evaluate the strength of its regional friendships. The statement was perceived to be targeted towards Uganda, Tanzania and Burundi, all which were perceived to have abandoned Kenya during the crucial voting rounds, ultimately costing Kenya's candidature (Mutambo, 2017). As Kenya therefore gears up for the ballot once again, it's important to practice cautious optimism especially in regard to counting on the full support of the EAC since internal wrangles that have existed in the EAC overtime may hinder all the partner

states from voting along the common resolution to support Kenya's bid.

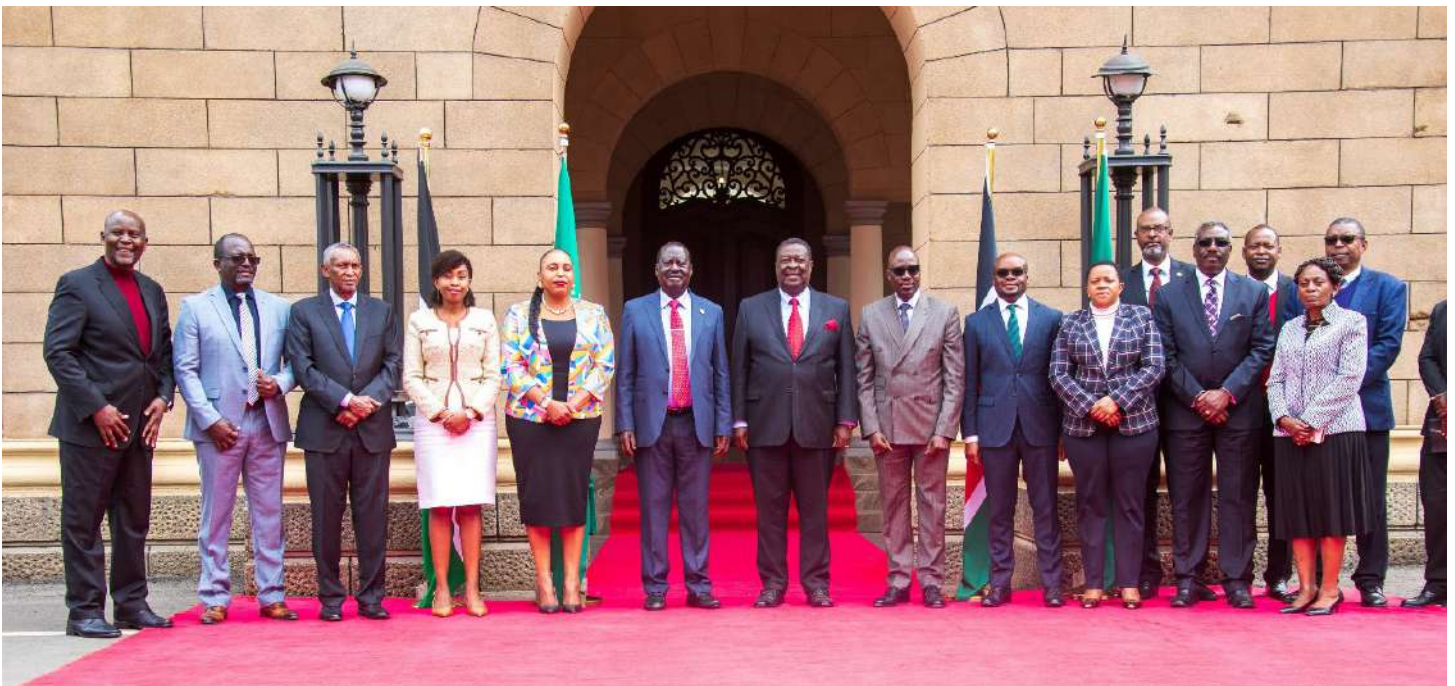
Raila Odinga's Bid and Kenya's Campaign Strategy

Raila Odinga brings in a vast amount of experience into the race especially in governance, a crucial skill needed for the general administration of the commission. Mr. Odinga has previously served as a member of parliament (1993-2013) while simultaneously holding different ministerial positions and ultimately the Prime Minister from 2008-2013. The highlighted positions give him an upper hand in offering leadership to the commission.

Over the years, Mr. Odinga has become a prominent figure in Kenyan politics, emerging as a key opposition leader. Through his leadership, he has consistently championed good governance, and accountability, solidifying his reputation as a statesman. Despite not holding the presidency, Mr Odinga has remained a central figure in Kenyan politics, continuously challenging the ruling governments and advocating for democratic reforms (Oyinloye, 2023). Besides domestic politics, Odinga has a background of involvement in continental affairs. In 2018, he

was appointed by Moussa Faki as the AU High Representative for Infrastructure and Development, a position he held till 2021. During his tenure as the High representative, he was exposed to the internal operations of the AU and is perceived to have forged connections with various key stakeholders across the continent. Prior to that, the AU fronted him as the chief mediator for the Ivory Coast 2011 post-election dispute between Laurent Gbagbo and Alassane Ouattara (Union, 2018). Although the mediation attempt was unsuccessful, his appointment by the AU signified some level of trust in Odinga's ability to engage in dispute resolution.

In light of Odinga's admirable credentials, overtime experience and lessons learnt from Amina's failed candidature, Kenya now appears to be keen on crafting an effective campaign strategy that will catapult him to the top AU job. Contrary to the 2017 campaign taskforce, President Ruto unveiled a campaign secretariat that is well-versed in diplomacy. The secretariat is led by Kenya's Foreign Affairs Principal Secretary Korir Sing'oei and former Kenyan Ambassador to the United States of America, Elkanah Odembo. The secretariat comprises of a diverse membership ranging from politicians to technocrats.



Raila Odinga's bid and Kenya's campaign strategy team (Photo Credit: Government of Kenya Official Statehouse Page)

Mr. Odinga has previously served as a member of parliament (1993-2013) while simultaneously holding different ministerial positions and ultimately the Prime Minister from 2008-2013

That notwithstanding, the President has further promoted Odinga among his counterparts through a series of international trips. President Ruto has utilized key Summit meetings such as the Forum on China Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), the 77th United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), 23rd COMESA Summit, by holding side meetings with African heads of state and government, with the aim of seeking their support.

An Evaluation of Odinga's Manifesto

The former Prime Minister, who has mainly campaigned as a Pan-Africanist has a manifesto based on eight pillars which rightly capture the continent's shared aspirations. The eight pillars include; **Economic Transformation, Enhancing Intra-African Trade, Financial Independence, Gender Equity, Agricultural Transformation, Climate Action, Peace and Security and Continental Integration** (Odinga, 2024). While the manifesto accurately highlights key areas that require action, a concern however is whether Odinga is taking up too much that he could handle by outlining the eight highlighted pillars as priority. The highlighted areas can however serve as a blueprint for Africa's vision since the highlighted areas cannot be addressed within a given tenure.

The comprehensive nature of Odinga's vision suggests an understanding of interconnected developmental challenges, yet the sheer scope of these eight pillars might potentially strain executive capacity and resource allocation. Despite this potential limitation, the manifesto's significance lies not merely in its immediate implementability, but in its potential to serve as a strategic blueprint for Africa's long-term developmental vision. The strategic framework proposed by Odinga transcends traditional political manifestos by presenting a pan-continental perspective that recognizes the intricate relationships between economic, social, and environmental domains. By addressing these interconnected pillars, the manifesto implicitly acknowledges that Africa's progress requires a synchronized,

holistic approach that goes beyond narrow national interests. While the complete realization of such an ambitious agenda might extend beyond a single political tenure, the manifesto's value resides in its potential to inspire collaborative, forward-looking governance across the African continent.

Regional Competition

Mr. Odinga's competitors include Mohamoud Youssouf from Djibouti, and Richard Randriamandrato from Madagascar. Of these contenders, Odinga and Mohamoud Youssouf are widely regarded as the frontrunners in the election owing to the high number of endorsements that they have been able to secure so far. Youssouf's major endorsement is from the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). The latter is an inter-governmental body that seeks to safeguard and protect the interests of the Muslim world in the spirit of promoting international peace and harmony. The OIC is among the largest intergovernmental organizations after the UN, with a membership of 57 states drawn from four different continents. During the 50th session of the OIC Council of Ministers of Foreign Affairs, the African states in the organization agreed to back Youssouf's candidature for the AUC chair position. Should all African member states align with the resolution, Djibouti stands to secure 28 votes from the continent. This contrasts sharply with Kenya's single regional body backing which stands at 8 votes (from the East African Community). Kenya can however rest on some little hope that countries such as Uganda, Burundi and Tanzania which have overlapping membership in the OIC and EAC have openly pledged to support its candidature.



AU Chair campaign debate 2025 (Photo Credit: African Union Media)

South Africa's support for Kenya, can therefore go a long way in helping the latter in gaining regional influence and diplomatic backing in the Southern Africa region. So far, Kenya has received endorsements from Malawi, Zambia, Tanzania and Zimbabwe within the SADC region

Besides the huge backing from the OIC, Youssouf has an impressive career record which includes heading the Arab Affairs department (1992-1997), serving as Djibouti's Ambassador to Egypt (1997-2001), and ultimately Minister for Foreign Affairs (2005- date). His long-term experience in the foreign service accompanied by the great endorsement from the OIC is greatly advantageous for Djibouti.

An Evaluation of Youssouf's Manifesto

Mohamoud Ali Youssouf's manifesto outlines an ambitious and multifaceted vision for Africa's future under his leadership as the Chairperson of the African Union Commission. His priorities are rooted in reforms to enhance the AU's operational efficiency, promote peace and security, stimulate economic development, and elevate Africa's position on the global stage. Central to his campaign is a commitment to institutional reform, targeting challenges in personnel management, funding, and regional coordination. Youssouf acknowledges the structural weaknesses within the AU and proposes a pragmatic and merit-based approach to address them. His focus on accountability and transparency is essential for rebuilding trust in AU institutions and ensuring that resources are utilized efficiently (Youssouf, 2024).

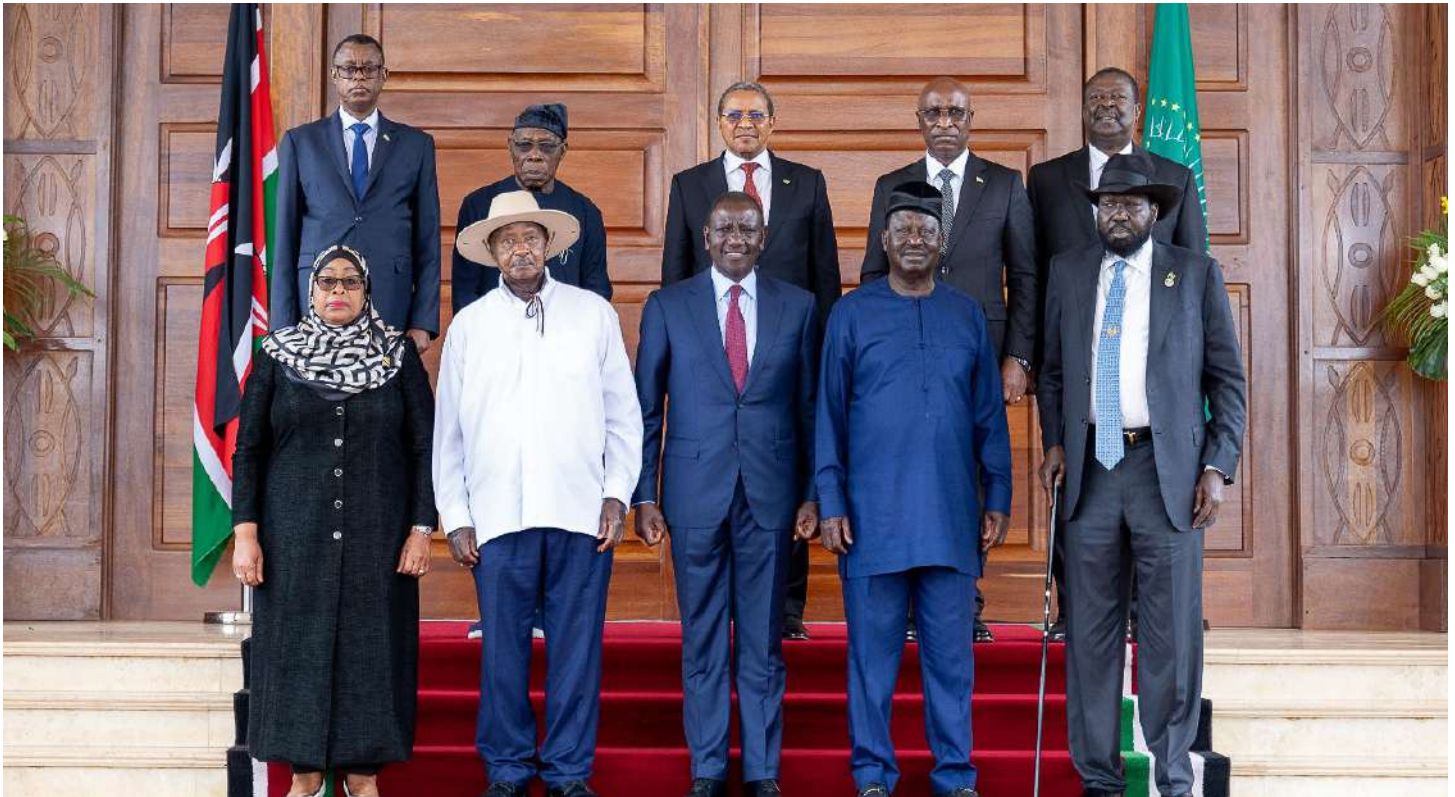
A key strength of Youssouf's vision is his emphasis on peace and security, which he describes as fundamental pillars for sustainable development. Drawing on his extensive diplomatic experience, he proposes enhancing conflict prevention, mediation mechanisms, and addressing the root causes of conflict, such as poverty, youth unemployment, and social inequalities. This holistic approach to peacebuilding aligns with Africa's need for stability to unlock its full potential. On the economic front, Youssouf champions the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) and advocates for infrastructure projects, such as integrated railways and electrification initiatives. These proposals, if implemented, could catalyze intra-African trade and foster regional economic integration. His pledge to strengthen educational systems, invest in healthcare, and promote the African Diaspora's engagement further highlights his commitment to inclusive development.

While the manifesto is aspirational and forward-looking, its ambitious nature raises questions about feasibility and the AU's capacity to implement such widespread reforms. Addressing systemic challenges, including securing sufficient funding, ensuring member states' commitment, and managing external partnerships, will require exceptional leadership and political will. Youssouf's ability to translate his vision into actionable policies will ultimately determine the success of his agenda.

Odinga's Support from the East African Region and other African Countries

In a move that is perceived to be a way of strengthening ties that cost its previous AUC chair bid, Kenya hosted various East African leaders during her candidate's unveiling ceremony. The high-profile ceremony was held on August 27, 2024, at the State House, Nairobi and was attended by EAC leaders such as President Salva Kiir Mayardit (South Sudan), President Samia Suluhu Hassan (Tanzania), President Yoweri Museveni (Uganda), Prime Minister Gervais Ndirakobuca (Burundi), and State Minister for Foreign Affairs James Kabarebe (Rwanda). Other notable figures present included former Tanzanian President Jakaya Kikwete and former Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo. Besides being a symbol of East African unity and support towards one candidate, the meeting provided an opportunity for dialogue on Raila's candidacy. Besides the EAC, Odinga has been able to receive official endorsements from Malawi, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Angola, Equatorial Guinea, Togo, Ghana, Mauritius, Guinea Bissau, Gambia, Algeria and Senegal. When tallied alongside the EAC member states endorsements, Mr. Odinga's prospective vote tally stands at 20.

Youssouf's campaign manifesto focuses on several key priorities which include reforms within the AU targeting issues related to personnel, funding and better coordination between regional economic communities



East African region and other African countries presidents and former Presidents at the State House, Nairobi-Kenya on August 27, 2024 (Photo Credit: Government of Kenya Statehouse Communication Media)

Youssef's prospective vote count on the other hand as a result of the OIC resolution, stands at 19 (excluding Uganda, Tanzania, Algeria, Equatorial Guinea, Gambia, Guinea-Bissau, Senegal, Sudan and Somalia). The aforementioned, despite being members of the OIC, have openly declared their support for Mr. Odinga with the exemption of the last two. Based on endorsements, Mr. Odinga has a narrow lead. It is important to note that the winner of the AUC Chairperson election will not require the usual 37 votes needed for a two-thirds majority. This is because six countries (Sudan, Mali, Niger, Guinea, Burkina Faso, and Gabon) have been suspended from the African Union (AU) due to unconstitutional changes in government. As a result, the total number of eligible voters is reduced to 49. Therefore, to secure the two-thirds majority, the winning candidate will need 33 votes out of the 49 remaining eligible votes.

Challenges to Odinga's candidature

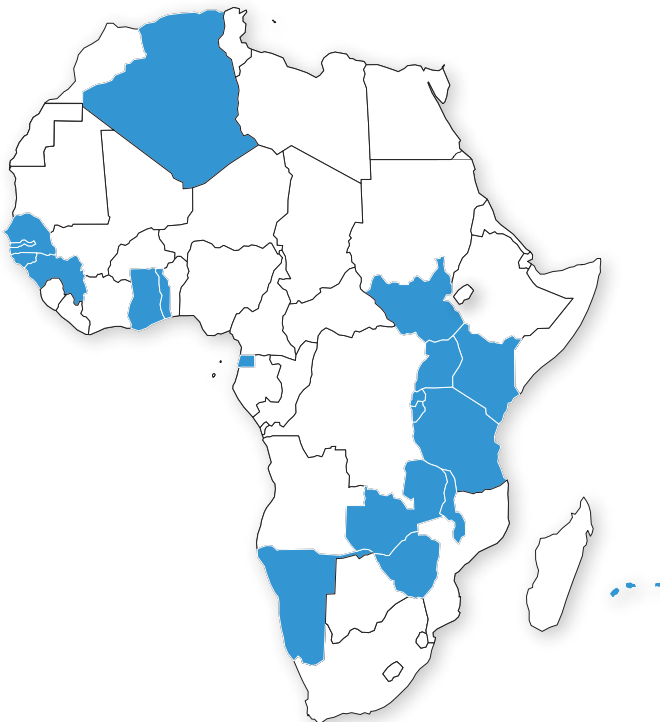
While Mr. Odinga's extensive experience accrued overtime is an asset, his age, currently 80, might present a challenge. Given that nearly 70 percent of the continent's population is below 30 years of age, a leadership perceived as less representative of the youth may face challenges in gaining widespread legitimacy after

election. This might be a challenge for both Raila as a candidate and the AU if he is elected, considering the 2017 AU reform report which highlighted the need to connect with African citizenry as a key area in transforming the union.

What can Kenya do to strengthen its Candidature?

As it employs other strategies, Kenya needs to heavily leverage on regional alliances and high-level engagements with individual states. The secretariat's decision to host the EAC leaders was an applaudable decision as it sought to strengthen ties within the EAC. Besides the EAC, the SADC-bloc is especially a key player in ensuring the success of Kenya's candidature. Being a predominantly anglophone bloc, the latter is traditionally expected to vote along Kenya. Kenya should therefore leverage on this advantage to strengthen its support base from the Southern region. The same is the case for Francophone countries that traditionally vote in favour their fellow Francophones, which in this case is Djibouti. The expected vote from the Francophone bloc may however reduce to Kenya's advantage owing to the suspension of four Francophone countries (Mali, Guinea, Niger, Gabon and Burkina Faso) from the union and the presence of Madagascar, a fellow Francophone in the race.

COUNTRIES IN SUPPORT OF HON. RAILA ODINGA-KENYA (DEC 2024)



■ Support Hon. Raila Odinga (Kenya)

In the Southern region, SADC-countries have overtime demonstrated a tendency of having a firm collective position, when compared to other regional blocs in the continent. Notable examples include their collective abstinence from the AUC chair vote in 2017 and the collective position on the readmission of Morocco into the AU. During the last AUC elections, as voting rounds progressed, member-states from the SADC bloc boycotted the vote, as a way of standing in solidarity with their candidate who had lost in the preliminary voting rounds. Besides the AUC elections, the bloc depicted its solidarity by voting against Morocco's readmission into the AU in 2017. Out of the 55-member states, 39 voted in favor of Morocco's readmission, the remaining member states that voted against or abstained were predominantly from the SADC-bloc, led by South Africa that has consistently supported the self-independence of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic. The latter demonstrated the influence that South Africa, an anchor state in the Southern region, had towards the vote.

South Africa's support for Kenya, can therefore go a long way in helping the latter in gaining regional influence and diplomatic backing in the Southern Africa region. So far, Kenya has received endorsements from Malawi, Zambia, Tanzania and Zimbabwe

within the SADC region. According to a strategist from the campaign secretariat, Kenya has garnered the support of South Africa, although South Africa is yet to make a public confirmation of this backing. Kenya could therefore leverage on its backing from South Africa, to gain more votes in the Southern Africa region if it has truly received the backing of South Africa.

Other recommendations for Kenya include;

1. Mr. Odinga should revise the priority areas outlined in his manifesto and reduce them to few feasible ones. He should afterwards consider actionable strategies of how he will achieve his revised priority areas. The latter could appeal to states that will not cast their votes based on geopolitical interests.
2. Kenya should consider having a robust fall-back strategy to ensure continued support in case multiple voting rounds are required. This approach is crucial because voting may extend to more than one round. Having a fall-back strategy is important as prolonged voting rounds can demand extensive diplomatic effort and consistent lobbying.
3. Kenya should continue to leverage high-level bilateral engagements as it has done and persist in seeking the support of individual states. Whether or not it secures backing from anchor states such as South Africa or Nigeria, Kenya must prioritize direct engagement with other nations to build its support base. Regional blocs, particularly those with large memberships, often experience divergence in their resolutions, as seen with the OIC. Kenya can strategically exploit this dynamic by pursuing independent alliances and securing endorsements outside of these blocs.
4. Kenya should prioritize engaging key stakeholder groups across the continent to build broad-based support. This includes actively involving African youth and civil society, whose influence in shaping policy discourses continues to grow. By highlighting how Kenya's leadership could address issues such as youth unemployment, education, and innovation, Kenya can demonstrate its commitment to the aspirations of the continent's majority demographic. Additionally, highlighting policies that promote gender equity and inclusivity that aligns with the African Union's Agenda 2063 and resonates with diverse stakeholders.

Conclusion

Kenya's pursuit of the African Union Commission chairmanship, through the candidacy of Raila Odinga, reflects a significant shift in both strategy and regional diplomacy. While the failure of Kenya's previous bid in 2017, through the candidacy of Amina Mohammed, was marred by internal challenges and insufficient regional support, the current campaign has been marked by a more inclusive and diplomatic approach. On the other hand, Mr. Odinga's extensive experience, both in domestic politics and continental affairs positions him as a strong contender for the role. Odinga's candidacy is however not without its challenges. Regional competition, particularly from Djibouti's Mohamoud Youssouf, and the internal dynamics of the East African Community remain significant obstacles. As the election approaches, Kenya's diplomatic efforts will determine whether it can turn the lessons of the past into a pathway to victory, securing a leadership role that shapes the future of the African Union and enhances Kenya's position on the continental and global stage.

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