

African Voices Full of Complaints over Democracy, Resource Plunder and Development at United Nations

By [Kester Kenn Klomegah](#)

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At least a majority of African leaders are calling for complete overhaul of multinational financial system to enable them to pursue their development goals across Africa. Their scathing remarks on negative impacts inflicted by imperialism, neocolonialism and western hegemony struck a serious chord during their invaluable speeches delivered at the United Nations General Assembly in New York.

But in critical assessment and careful analysis of developments for the past decades, Africa's poor development could be attributed to several reasons which African leaders have realized but grossly failed to address in the continent. African leaders provided diverse perspectives on the state of politics, economic development and socio-cultural issues that are unique and thought provoking. Paradoxically, Africa has huge resources both natural and human, but the larger size of its population lives in abject poverty. As it is now, the African continent is wrapped with its own distinctive complexities and contradictions.

Conflicts, Democracy and Good Governance

The nature of politics in Africa includes monarchy, autocracy, military dictatorship and democracy. The intellectual and middle-class apathy to politics is also formed alongside down the years. Throughout its history, civil society has been mounting peaceful demonstrations to demand transparency and accountability primarily due to weak institutions and ineffective organs of the state especially the parliaments. Opposition groups are stifled putting democracy at risk across Africa.

A number of African leaders have different views about the fundamentals of democracy. Guinea's military leader **Mamady Doumbouya** told the U.N. General Assembly that the Western model of democracy does not work for Africa, as evidenced by a recent wave of coups. Doumbouya took power by overthrowing **Alpha Conde**, Guinea's then 84-year-old

president who had changed the constitution to run for a third term, sparking widespread protests. Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, Chad and Gabon are also run by military officers.

The United Nations and Western powers such as the United States and France have urged democracy to be restored as soon as possible in those French-speaking West African states. But Doumbouya vehemently argues during his speech at the UN that Africans are mature enough to design their own models of governance.

“Africa is suffering from a governance model that has been imposed on it... a model that is good and effective for the West but is difficult to adapt to our realities, our customs and environment,” he told world leaders gathered in New York.

Image: President Matamela Cyril Ramaphosa of South Africa addresses the general debate of the General Assembly’s 78th session. (Source: UN Photo/Cia Pak)



At the United Nations General Assembly, South African **President Cyril Ramaphosa** told the gathering there that through the United Nations Charter nations accepted a shared mandate to foster peace and to promote fundamental human rights, social progress and a better standard of life for all.

“And yet, as we gather here, much of humanity is confronted by war and conflict, by want and hunger, by disease and environmental disaster. Solidarity and trust between states is being eroded. Inequality, poverty and unemployment are deepening. In these conditions and in the wake of a devastating global pandemic, the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals seem increasingly remote,” according to Ramaphosa.

The global community needs to work alongside the African Union to support peace efforts in the eastern DRC, Libya, Sudan, Somalia, Mali, Central African Republic, South Sudan, northern Mozambique, the Great Lakes Region, the Sahel, Niger and the Horn of Africa. (UNGA, September 19, 2023). The UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General and Head of the United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel (UNOWAS), **Mohamed Ibn Chambas**, suggested to the UN Security Council’s meeting as far back in 2020 that conflicts raging through Africa have to be dealt with through multilateral mechanisms. Academic research studies have shown that radical Islamic groups have set foot in Libya, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Chad, Somalia, Kenya, Sudan and South Sudan, and are spreading further throughout Africa.

The military leaders of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger signed a mutual defense pact, establishing the so-called Alliance of Sahel States. It was explained that the objective was establishing an architecture of collective defense and mutual assistance for the benefit of the population and the three participating states in the Sahel region. A similar multilateral defense mechanism already exists in Southern Africa. The Southern African Development Community (SADC) with support from the Addis Ababa-based African Union Commission (AUC) has set up the deployment of a joint regional military force in Mozambique. According

to the statement released by SADC (Southern African Review, July 2012), the mission has as its objective, to support the Republic of Mozambique in the fight against acts of terrorism and extremist violence, in addition to supporting the country in restoring the rule of law in the affected areas of Cabo Delgado province.

Moussa Faki Mahamat, the Chairperson of the African Union Commission (AUC), highly commended and described it “as a strong and concrete act of African solidarity” on the part of the Rwandan Government and the Southern African Development Community (SADC). The forces are still based in Cabo Delgado Province, Mozambique. That region has suffered from what is, always referred to as acts of terrorism. Beginning in October 2017, armed extremists linked to the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) launched an insurgency in the Cabo Delgado region of Mozambique.

Reviewing the gravity of these conflicts and Islamic militant treats, it is therefore necessary to ensure a continental security. A set of measures needs to be taken along with preventive action to combat possible threats. The biggest vulnerabilities include proliferation of weapons, weak border control and unprotected industrial facilities.

Creating effective armed forces is just one factor in ensuring national security. Preventive measures are necessary in order to eliminate the root causes of conflicts, and review and plan for sustainable development. And it is necessary to resolve acute socioeconomic problems and strengthen public institutions in Africa.

In spite of the suggestions mentioned above, African leaders expressed support for the UN Secretary-General in the New Agenda for Peace for Member States to provide more sustainable and predictable financing for peace-building efforts. But on the opposite side, there have been so many unconstitutional changes of government in some parts of Africa.

Bema D. Yeo, a doctoral student in Global Security at the American Military University and a U.S army veteran, however argues in a report that “[Given] the emergence of the new wave of politicians in West African countries alongside the resurgence of coup d’états [it] has become evident that Africa is at a critical juncture in its political evolution.”

In assessing the political evolutionary processes in the continent, it is convincing to say that Africa is experiencing transformative changes especially through military coups. The path ahead may be fraught with obstacles, but with determination and strategic foresight it may lead to a better future political stability. “The success of the new leaders in this political landscape may require a commitment to inclusive governance, transparency, and accountability. Learning from the successes and failures of past political transitions will be instrumental in steering these nations towards a future characterized by stable, prosperous, and democratic societies,” the expert concluded.

Mismanagement and Deep-Seated Corruption

The 12th Regional Conference of Heads of Anti-Corruption Agencies in Commonwealth Africa convened in Kigali, Rwanda, from May 2022 under the theme: ‘Combating Corruption for Good Governance and Sustainable Development in Africa’ shared and exchanged reports. It finally discussed the impacts of corruption on sustainable development in Africa and innovative approaches in the fight against corruption, to fast-track implementation of the UN Convention against Corruption (UNCAC). This action or decision pointed explicitly to the common fundamental fact that was in line with Africa’s Agenda 2063, “The Africa We Want”

- aspiration number 3, which provides for an Africa of good governance, democracy, respect for human rights, justice and the rule of law.

Most African countries have ratified the African Union Convention on preventing and combating corruption and other international legal instruments on corruption. As required by international obligations, African countries have enacted national anti-corruption laws and established anti-corruption institutions. Almost every African country has a specialized anti-corruption agency to address specific crimes and malpractices including illicit flow, money laundering, embezzlement, and conflict of interest among others.

Prime Minister Ngirente, for instance, pointed out to the conference several reports indicating that global corruption is now costing around \$1 trillion annually. There are common causes of Africa's corruption, and this is adversely impacting the lives of African people. Corruption creates economic distortions and hampers investments. There are so many corruption-linked adverse effects. Corruption is a serious threat to sustainable and equitable development.

Corruption in South Africa

Under the presidency of **Jacob Zuma**, who ruled South Africa from 2009 to 2018, corruption was at its highest. Zuma participated in anti-apartheid struggle until South Africa finally attained its independence in 27 April 1994. He held various positions in the ruling African National Congress (ANC) until he was elected president of South Africa. Before that, he was deputy to **President Thabo Mbeki**, but was dismissed due to corruption over arm deals. There were multiple graft scandals and he was forced to step down in February 2018, and currently spends time in prison, and faces corruption allegations in court.

In January 2018, as elected president of the African National Congress, Cyril Ramaphosa has raised hopes that he will stamp out corruption.

“Corruption must be fought with the same intensity and purpose that we fight poverty, unemployment and inequality. We must also act fearlessly against alleged corruption and abuse of office within our ranks,” Ramaphosa declared in his maiden speech after his election. “We must investigate without fear or favour the so-called ‘accounting irregularities’ that caused turmoil in the markets and wiped billions off the investments of ordinary South Africans,” he added.

In May 2021, Ramaphosa acknowledged to the South African commission investigating corruption and graft, that the ruling ANC party did little to prevent corruption, including by his predecessor Jacob Zuma.

“State capture and corruption have taken a great toll on our society and indeed on our economy as well,” Ramaphosa said. “They have eroded the values of our constitution and undermined the rule of law. If allowed to continue they would threaten the achievement of growth, development and transformation of our country.”

Since Ramaphosa made his promise in 2018, there are still fresh demonstrations and allegations of persistent corruption in Ramaphosa's administration and inside the government.

Africa Needs Strong Institutions

The Transparency International's Global Corruption Barometer, in its 2021 report indicated that "Corruption is hindering Africa's economic, political and social development... More than this, it affects the well-being of individuals, families and large communities." The report attributed the deterioration of rule of law and weak democratic institutions, as well as a rapidly shrinking space for civil society and independent media to corruption in Africa.

In July 2009, **Barack Obama** was right when he told political tyrants and autocratic African leaders who have enriched themselves through opaque deals, that Africa's future (including efforts to uproot all kinds of crimes and engage in sustainable development) is up to Africans.

"Development depends upon good governance. That is the ingredient which has been missing in far too many places, for far too long. That is the change that can unlock Africa's potential. And that is a responsibility that can only be met by Africans," Obama said during his first landmark presidential trip to Africa.

Obama, in addition, declared that "Africa doesn't need strongmen, it needs strong institutions." Some leaders of external countries have a policy to interfere in the internal politics of African states, and as a result end up supporting long-time corrupt autocratic leaders. Here it must not be analysed that the United States is imposing its model of democracy.

It is a normal political culture to show tenets of good governance by public accountability and that business deals at the highest levels are conducted with transparency. For instance, large-scale deals involving natural resources must be thoroughly discussed at the legislative assembly, and approved by the executive cabinet. Unilateral decisions taken by a leader without consulting with legislative bodies or parliament and the cabinet, are prone to be criticized by civil society.

Simultaneously, there should be initiatives to boost transparency. It is worth keeping in mind the suggestion made by the Republic of Ghana's Vice President, **Mahamudu Bawumia**, who stated in May 2022 :

"Building strong institutions means putting in place the right systems and practices that ensure transparency and bring about efficiency. As the saying goes, the biggest disease is corruption and the vaccine is transparency. The fact is that corrupt people hate transparency."

Economic Policies and Strategies

The African Union expresses hope that through a series of actions and strategic mechanisms, African countries will be able to overcome development difficulties and deficiencies. The opening of the world's largest free trade area, popularly referred to as the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), in Africa on January 2021, is also seen as one great leap towards attaining economic independence.

It aims at making Africa the largest common market in the world and accelerating continental integration. It is expected to reinforce the measures taken in terms of free movement of persons and goods and services across borders. But much depends on the

collective determination and solidarity demonstrated, to face the challenges in a united and resolute manner, by the African leaders. It depends on the strong mobilization of African leaders and the effective coordination provided by the African Union.

For this to be successful, Africa has to engage in modernising agriculture, strengthening agri-food systems by working towards its own food security rather than simply accept food packages as 'gifts' from the so-called external friends. The next stage is to industrialize, add value to the agricultural products by processing them, and finally distributing locally and for exports, hence the establishment of the AfCFTA. From this concrete perspective will emerge a new Africa, "the Africa we want", which has understandably become the resounding guiding slogan.

Modernising Food Production

What is Africa doing with its huge agricultural lands? In fact, taking adequate measures toward shedding import dependency should be part of the African leaders' challenge, as should improving food production for the entire population which stands at an estimated 1.4 billion. Africans should not be presented as beggars at the global stage. The most popular rhetoric is that Africa has abundant natural resources, and yet Africa remains the world's poorest and least-developed continent, resulting from various causes including deep-seated political corruption. According to the United Nations Human Development Report in 2023, the bottom ranked (151st to 175th) are all African states.

At the Paris summit, AfDB President Akinwumi Adesina, insisted that "it is necessary to unlock Africa's potential in agriculture. Africa must feed itself." He emphasized that adopting measures for establishing food security is crucial to sustainable development. Addressing food security, therefore, is one of the keys for Africa in this 21st century. In this context, it is important to say here that the African Development Bank (AfDB) and the African Export-Import Bank (Afreximbank) have gained increasing prominence for their work with the private sectors within Africa. These two banks support the agricultural sectors, but more is needed to meet the highest targets.

Faustin-Archange Touadera and William Ruto

Taking the podium at the United Nations General Assembly, the president of the Central African Republic, Faustin-Archange Touadera, spoke about the appalling consequences of the plundering of natural resources. He was not alone in saying this. Alongside the widespread attacks on the unipolar system, many African leaders who spoke in New York hold the perception that Westerners and Europeans have plundered the continent's natural resources through slavery and colonization.

Western governments and aid organizations have poured billions of dollars into Africa suffering from hunger, armed conflict and other crises over the years, but critics say delivery of the aid is often hampered by corruption from local governments and militants. Corruption has been a characteristic feature of African politics, from the Maghreb down to the Southern African Development Community, from the East African Community and the Horn of Africa across the Sahel to the Atlantic coastal West African States.

Addressing the General Assembly later, Kenyan **President William Ruto** said investments in technology, infrastructure, green initiatives and agriculture in Africa will "enable our young people to find the livelihoods they desire at home, and reverse the tide of migration

in the opposite direction.”

Progress Slow But SDGs Still Vital

As the world continues to evolve with key players pursuing their special interests, Africa has to discern between the truths and untruths. Speeches at the September UNGA in New York reviewed the achievements, the challenges and the highlighted pathways into the future. Some of the African leaders offered resonating development strategies, future visions worthy of appreciation that need to be unreservedly supported. Those suggestions are consistent with the ideals of African Union’s Agenda 2063 and that of the UN SDGs 2030.

Seemingly there are three main directions: democracy and good governance, food security and industrialization, and economy and trade. These could lead to social inclusion, and broadening employment for the youth and the next generation. They could also lead to economic growth, stability and better life conditions across Africa. All aspects of Africa’s development are incorporated into the joint report published at the African Economic Conference 2022.

In a nutshell, Africa is lagging behind on the UN’s sustainable development goals. However, the report further argued that formulating policies to promote the SDGs should include transforming agricultural productivity through modernization and promoting equitable and affordable access to energy. Achieving the SDGs in their entirety may now be beyond many African nations, but much good could still come out of conscious efforts to pursue them. That ought to concentrate minds as global policymakers meet in New York for the UN General Assembly.

The African Union and African leaders have to realign the foreign policies, back away from geopolitical insinuations, rather with eagle eyes take advantage of the complexities and confrontations to look for substantive opportunities to support their efforts in pursuit of building back better. Attaining sustainable development requires allies, transforming relations and refining strategies with external players. It is also advisable to improve deteriorating relations in order to avoid regret in the foreseeable future. Above all, what is necessary, during this changing era, is the ability to prioritize negotiations instead of engaging in geopolitical games and confrontations. We cannot install steel borders, segregate and put partitions in this emerging multipolar world.

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Kester Kenn Klomegah, who worked previously with Inter Press Service (IPS), Weekly Blitz and InDepthNews, is now a regular contributor to Global Research. He researches Eurasia, Russia, Africa and BRICS. His focused interest areas include geopolitical changes, foreign relations and economic development questions relating to Africa. As a versatile researcher, he believes that everyone deserves equal access to quality and trustworthy media reports.

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