



By: TA | AP Insight

Can the African Union overcome the legitimacy crisis?



Africa's top regional body is hosting its annual summit in Ethiopia this weekend to discuss the future of the continent of some 1.4 billion people, as the organization faces **widespread discontent**.

Set up to "promote the unity and solidarity of the African States," analysts say the African Union faces a legitimacy crisis among youth for failing to meet their expectations.

Meanwhile, several African countries battle **military coups**, **disputed elections** and **protests** inspired by economic hardship worsened by **foreign aid cuts**.

A bloc of old leaders

Africa has the youngest population in the world, with more than 400 million people aged 15 to 35 years old. But it is also home to several of the oldest and longest-serving leaders — a paradox that has contributed to an upsurge in coups.

With a young population set to double by 2050, it is the only rapidly growing region where its people are getting poorer.

Many African youths, on social media, express how they view the AU as 'a bloc of old leaders', which sees their interests as less of a priority.

The organization has missed opportunities to be people-centered and citizen-driven - Liesl Louw-Vaudran

The organization has missed opportunities to be people-centered and citizen-driven and has instead focused largely on governments and leaders, said Liesl Louw-Vaudran, a senior analyst with the Crisis Group.

"What the youth is really asking and why people are frustrated is because this is not an African Union for citizens. It's not a people-driven African Union," Louw-Vaudran added.

Elections are one example of the AU's loopholes

As several African countries held elections for new presidents over the last year, a clear pattern of sidelined opposition candidates emerged, leading to disputed results and protests from mostly young voters after incumbents were reelected.

The AU was often accused of being quick to side with the reelected and slow to call out flawed processes.

As authorities in Uganda shut down the internet and clamped down on the opposition during the East African country's presidential election in January, the African Union Commission issued a statement "commending" the conduct of the poll.

This enraged many youths, with one person saying: "Dictatorship club has spoken."

The day after, the AU election observer mission issued a preliminary report noting "reports of harassment, intimidation and arrest of opposition leaders, candidates, supporters' media and civic society actors" in the election.

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One key challenge the AU has battled over the years is weak enforcement of resolutions, according to Macharia Munene, a professor of history at the United States International University in Nairobi.

And that's because "not all members meet their dues or fully accept what is generally decided," he said.

In Nigeria's capital of Abuja, resident Chima Ekwueme said the African Union does not care about holding leaders accountable, citing Nigeria's deadly security crises and economic hardship despite its rich mineral wealth.

"They are there for their own interests," Ekwueme, 32, told The Associated Press. "In Nigeria, we have all it takes to put things in order (but) look at how difficult things are and where is the AU?"

An AU Summit coming amid a new world order

At the 39th African Union Summit being held in Ethiopia's capital, Addis Ababa, on Saturday and Sunday, the theme is water and sanitation.

Discussions will feature the continent's response to climate change and humanitarian crises following foreign aid cuts from international partners such as the United States.



The AU Summit will provide an opportunity to align continental priorities with international partners - Mahamoud Ali Youssouf with Ursula Von der Leyen

Observers say the AU Summit will provide an opportunity to align continental priorities with international partners, especially as discussions around a '**new world order**' stirred by U.S. President Donald Trump come up, with foreign leaders signaling shifting global alliances.

"From Sudan to the Sahel, to eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, in Somalia and elsewhere, our people continue to pay the heavy price of instability," AU Commission Chairperson Mahamoud Ali Youssouf said Saturday.

He also called for an immediate halt to the

"extermination.. of the Palestinian people," prompting Mohammad Mustafa, Prime Minister of the State of Palestine, to thank Africa for its solidarity.

Still, critics urge the African Union to look inward by paying closer attention to the continent's most pressing challenges and doing more to hold leaders accountable when they fail to meet expectations.