

# POLICY BRIEF

## THE ROLE OF THE CHAIRPERSON OF THE AFRICAN UNION COMMISSION

HIGH EXPECTATIONS FOR THE NEXT AU COMMISSION CHAIR

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The position of Chairperson of the African Union Commission (AUC) carries significant authority and responsibility, with a broad mandate to steer the organization's agenda.

Since its inception in 2002, the impact of the AUC Chairperson has varied widely, reflecting the complexities of managing a continental body composed of diverse member states with competing interests and priorities.

## SUMMARY

- **Chief Executive Officer**

The Chairperson, appointed by the Assembly of the 55 member states, serves as the chief executive officer of the African Union Commission.

- **Administrative and Financial Oversight**

The Chairperson is responsible for the Commission's overall administration and finances.

- **Diplomatic Coordination**

The role involves consulting and coordinating with member states' governments, other institutions, and Regional Economic Communities (RECs) on AU activities, and conducting the AU's diplomatic representations.

- **Key Responsibilities**

The Chairperson's duties include making appointments to AUC posts, overseeing peacekeeping missions, and mediating conflicts.

- **Challenges and Focus**

Previous chairs have often struggled to balance the competing interests of the role. The current officeholder, Moussa Faki Mahamat, has concentrated on climate change, peacekeeping, AU management reform, and promoting continental integration and free trade.

# THE ROLE OF THE CHAIRPERSON OF THE AFRICAN UNION COMMISSION

## HIGH EXPECTATIONS FOR THE NEXT AU COMMISSION CHAIR

### Introduction

The inaugural Chairperson of the African Union Commission after its transition from the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) was Alpha Oumar Konaré, who served from 2003 to 2008.

Reflecting on the challenges of the role, Konaré stated, "Leading the African Union Commission is not just about managing an institution; it's about navigating the competing interests of 55 member states, each with its own priorities and expectations. It is a job that demands resilience, wisdom, and sometimes, the patience to build consensus where none seems possible."

Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma, the first African woman to hold the post from 2012 to 2017, echoed similar sentiments about the complexities of the role. She noted, "The job of the AU Commission chairperson is to drive the vision of a united, prosperous, and peaceful Africa, but it is also about managing the complex dynamics of continental politics, where each member state has its own interests, cultures, and priorities. It requires diplomacy, patience, and a deep understanding of Africa's diverse landscape."

These reflections by Konaré and Dlamini-Zuma underscore the essence of the AUC Chairperson's role: balancing the AU's collective goals with the varying interests of its member states while demonstrating strategic leadership and diplomatic acumen.

A senior African Union Commission staff member, speaking anonymously to this writer to engage candidly, remarked, "The post holder needs to command trust from the majority of Africa's 55 leaders, which calls for exceptional statesmanship, political experience, and knowledge."

The high-level diplomatic source, based in Addis Ababa, further described the role as "one of the most difficult jobs in the world."

### Focus of the Current Chairperson: Moussa Faki Mahamat

Moussa Faki Mahamat, the current Chairperson from Chad, has focused on several key areas to promote peace, stability, and development across Africa. His tenure has been marked by efforts to address both longstanding and emerging challenges.

"Silencing the Guns," an agenda aimed at ending all conflicts in Africa, has been a notable part of his platform.

However, this goal has not yet been fully realised. Faki has continued to push for conflict prevention and resolution across the continent but has faced criticisms primarily revolving around governance, leadership, transparency, and handling specific crises.

Critics have accused Faki of not demonstrating strong and decisive leadership in addressing some of Africa's most critical conflicts and crises and bringing a "hands-off" approach.

For instance, his handling of the Tigray conflict in Ethiopia and the situation in the Sahel has been criticised as either too slow or insufficiently assertive.

## **Understanding the Role of the AU Commission Chairperson**

Beyond the title of chief executive officer, the Constitutive Act of the African Union does not provide a detailed description of the Chairperson's role. However, the Statutes of the African Union Commission, derived from the Constitutive Act, outline the Chairperson's roles, responsibilities, and functions.

The statutes explicitly describe the desired qualities for the chairperson, the candidate selection process, and the length of tenure. The Chairperson is required to uphold the values of the African Union, even at the risk of challenging member states.

For example, during the wave of unconstitutional changes of government in Africa, AUC Chair Alpha Oumar Konaré (2003–2008) famously declared, "Africa will no longer tolerate the era of coups. We are here to build democratic institutions, not to defend dictatorships."

Konaré, who also served as the Malian President from 1992 to 2002, set a precedent for a zero-tolerance policy on coups, underscoring the AU's commitment to democratic governance.

During the Darfur crisis, Konaré was vocal about addressing the humanitarian crisis in Sudan. Under his leadership, the AU

established the African Union Mission in Sudan (AMIS) to monitor the situation and protect civilians.

He said, "The world cannot stand by as Darfur bleeds. We must act with urgency, or history will judge us harshly."

Jean Ping from Gabon, who succeeded Konaré and was the first individual of Chinese descent to lead the executive branch of the AU, emphasized African-led solutions during the Libya crisis.

He stated, "Africa's problems require African solutions. We will not accept external interference dictating our future."

His stance against NATO intervention displayed his belief in African sovereignty. On Zimbabwe's political turmoil, he remarked, "Zimbabwe's leaders must understand that the time for playing with the people's future is over. The AU will not stand by if democracy is undermined."

This statement highlighted Ping's firm stance against electoral manipulation and human rights abuses, despite the risk of alienating Zimbabwe's government.

## **Informal Norms in Appointing AUC Chairs**

Despite the broad and vague requirements of the job, some informal norms exist for appointments to the post. AUC Chairpersons, like the secretary-general in the UN, typically come from countries considered small or medium-sized neutral powers. To date, all appointees have been male diplomats or politicians, except for Dlamini-Zuma, the first African woman to serve in the position and the only one from an influential country, South Africa.

Her election was somewhat of an

exception to the trend of selecting leaders from smaller or neutral countries for the AU's top posts. AUC Chairpersons generally serve no more than two four-year terms. Although a national from an Eastern or Northern African country has yet to hold the seat, regional rotation has become a key issue, to be observed starting with the February 2025 elections.

The Chairperson position has been reserved for the Eastern African region, with Nairobi, Djibouti, Port Louis, and Antananarivo expressing interest.

Meanwhile, the deputy chair will see Rabat, Algiers, Tripoli, and Cairo vying for the position, with the eight commissioner seats distributed among other regions.

Historically, the Eastern and Northern regions have been the most divisive in AU politics, and this trend is likely to continue in the 2025 elections.

## **Main Responsibilities of the AUC Chairperson**

The AUC Chairperson's responsibilities are multifaceted, encompassing administration, human resources, peacekeeping, and mediation efforts across Africa.

### **Key responsibilities include:**

#### **1. Administrative Responsibilities - Policy Implementation:**

The Chairperson ensures AU policies and decisions made by the AU Assembly and Executive Council are effectively implemented. For example, Moussa Faki Mahamat has focused on institutional reforms to enhance AU efficiency and self-financing.

#### **2. Resource Management:**

The Chairperson oversees budget preparation, resource allocation, and financial transparency. Under Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma, there was a push for financial reforms to reduce dependence on external donors.

#### **3. Coordination of AU Bodies:**

The Chairperson coordinates activities of AU bodies like the Peace and Security Council (PSC), ensuring cohesive policy implementation. Alpha Oumar Konaré played a pivotal role in setting up AU structures after the OAU transitioned to the AU.

#### **4. Human Resources Management-Appointments:**

The Chairperson appoints senior officials and staff crucial for the commission's functioning. They also appoint special envoys tasked with brokering peace deals or addressing other priority areas on Africa's Agenda 2063. Such appointments are influenced by the happenings in the continent or member states' preferences. A case in point was the appointment of Raila Odinga, opposition leader and now AUC Chair candidate representing Kenya, as the AU High Representative for Infrastructure Development in Africa on October 20, 2018. This post was created by Moussa Faki and was seen as a way to neutralise Odinga after a disputed election that led to political violence in Kenya. The role was later terminated in February 2023 after Odinga lost the 2022 elections to William Ruto, and Nairobi requested his termination due to his continued politicking.

#### **5. Capacity Building:**

The Chairperson is responsible for staff training and development. Dlamini-Zuma initiated capacity-building programs to

enhance staff skills in policy formulation and conflict resolution.

## **6. Promoting Diversity:**

The Chairperson ensures AU staff diversity, maintaining regional and gender balance. Dlamini-Zuma launched initiatives like the campaign to end child marriage to advocate for women's rights.

## **7. Peacekeeping Responsibilities-Overseeing Peace Operations:**

The Chairperson works with the AU Peace and Security Council to mandate and monitor AU-led peace missions, such as Faki's oversight of the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM).

## **8. Resource Mobilization:**

The Chairperson engages with member states and international partners to secure funding for peace operations. Konaré, for example, mobilized resources for the AU's missions in Sudan and Burundi. His efforts were instrumental in setting up and maintaining these peacekeeping operations, reflecting his commitment to peace and security on the continent.

## **9. Mediation and Conflict Resolution Responsibilities:**

The Chairperson plays a crucial role in mediating conflicts, directly engaging with conflicting parties to foster peace. For instance, Dlamini-Zuma was involved in the South Sudan peace process, leveraging her position to bring conflicting factions to the negotiation table.

## **10. Diplomatic Engagement:**

The Chairperson conducts high-level diplomacy in conflict zones, fostering dialogue among member states. Moussa Faki has been active in mediating the Ethiopia-Tigray conflict and the Libyan

crisis, though his efforts have faced mixed reviews regarding their effectiveness.

## **11. Supporting Peace Initiatives:**

The Chairperson promotes frameworks like the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA), which aims to build and maintain peace across the continent. Konaré played a significant role in shaping the AU's modern peace and security operations, emphasizing African-led solutions to African problems.

## **How is the Chairperson Elected?**

The election of the AUC Chairperson involves a nomination process by member states, followed by an election by the Assembly of Heads of State and Government (African leaders). All 55 member states participate in the election process, with each state having one vote. As of now, there are six countries (Mali, Guinea-Conakry, Sudan, Burkina Faso, Chad, Niger), that have been suspended from the African Union due to unconstitutional changes of government, such as military coups.

Despite all members having a voice in the polls, a few influential countries occasionally sway the polls toward their preferred candidates. However, there is no veto power, and no single state can outright eliminate a nominee.

The election is conducted through a secret ballot, and candidates must secure a two-thirds majority of member states' votes to win. To promote fairness, AU rules introduced in 2018 mandate regional rotation, gender balance, and merit. For the 2025 elections, the AUC Chairperson seat has been reserved for the Eastern African region, while the Deputy Chair will be chosen from the Northern region.

The requirement for a two-thirds majority ensures that the candidate has broad-based support across the continent. If no candidate achieves a two-thirds majority during the African Union Commission elections, a run-off election is held. The AU stipulates that:

### **1. Run-Off Round:**

If no candidate secures a two-thirds majority of the member states eligible to vote in the first round, a second round is conducted. This process continues until one candidate receives the required two-thirds majority.

### **2. Subsequent Voting Rounds:**

If, after several rounds, no candidate still achieves the two-thirds majority, the candidate with the lowest votes is eliminated. Voting continues until only two candidates remain.

### **3. Final Round:**

If no candidate obtains a two-thirds majority even in the final round, the election is postponed to a later date, allowing for further negotiations and consensus-building among member states.

## **The Chairperson's Relationship with the Assembly of Leaders**

The relationship between the AUC Chairperson and the Assembly of Leaders can be both collaborative and contentious, depending on the issue at hand.

For instance, Moussa Faki, the current Chairperson, faced a significant diplomatic crisis in 2021 when he granted Israel observer status at the African Union. This decision, made without full consensus, led to a backlash from several

member states, especially those staunchly supporting the Palestinian cause.

Countries like Algeria and South Africa vocally opposed Faki's decision, arguing it contradicted the AU's historical support for Palestinian self-determination. The commotion peaked at the 2022 AU Summit in Addis Ababa, where heated debates took place on whether to revoke Israel's observer status.

The matter caused a deep rift among member states, highlighting the complexities of balancing diverse political stances. Ultimately, the AU Assembly suspended Israel's observer status and referred the issue to a committee for further review, showcasing the politically charged nature of the AUC Chairperson's role.

## **The Future Focus of the AUC Chairperson**

The future focus of the AUC Chairperson will likely revolve around existing AU priorities and emerging challenges. Key areas of emphasis could include:

### **1. Peace and Security:**

The Chairperson will continue to prioritise conflict resolution and mediation efforts in volatile regions such as the Sahel, Horn of Africa, Great Lakes region, and parts of West Africa. Addressing ongoing conflicts in Sudan, Ethiopia's Tigray region, and threats from militant groups like Boko Haram and Al-Shabaab will require robust mediation strategies.

### **2. Countering Unconstitutional Changes of Government:**

With the resurgence of military coups in countries like Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso,

and Niger, the AU's commitment to upholding democratic governance will be tested. The Chairperson must lead efforts to restore democratic processes while respecting member states' sovereignty.

### **3. Economic Integration and Development:**

Advancing the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) will be a significant focus to boost intra-African trade, economic growth, and reduce dependence on external markets. The Chairperson will work with member states to address challenges related to infrastructure, tariffs, non-tariff barriers, and regulatory harmonization.

### **4. Agriculture and Food Security:**

With Africa's population growth and increasing climate-related challenges, food security will remain a critical issue. The Chairperson must advocate for sustainable agricultural practices, research, and innovation to boost productivity and climate resilience.

## **Conclusion**

The role of the Chairperson of the African Union Commission is both demanding and dynamic, requiring a delicate balance between leadership, diplomacy, and strategic foresight.

As the AU evolves and new challenges emerge, the Chairperson must navigate a complex landscape of competing interests, while driving the continent towards unity, peace, and prosperity.

With the upcoming 2025 elections, the choice of the next Chairperson will be pivotal in shaping the future direction of the continental body and its role on the global stage.



*African Union headquarters, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.*