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SMALL STATES AND REGIONAL COOPERATION IN WEST AFRICA

WHAT IS THE LEGACY OF BENIN'S PRESIDENCY OF THE AFRICAN UNION?¹

Dustin Dehez / Christian E. Rieck / Alessandro Scheffler

At the 18th summit of the African Union in January 2012, Benin's head of state and government Boni Yayi took over the presidency of the African regional organisation. Yayi's AU presidency ended a heated disagreement, which had provided telling insight into the situation within the AU ahead of the election. Benin's goals for this presidency were ambitious. In his inaugural address, Yayi promised to concentrate above all on deepening peace and security on the continent – a formidable challenge in view of the decades of civil war in Somalia and the Democratic Republic of the Congo as well as disintegration processes taking place in half a dozen other African states. However, Benin did not limit itself to these goals, but also declared a deepening of economic integration, the political unification of the continent, and progress in the area of good governance objectives of the presidency, which was just one year in duration. Measured against Benin's administrative capabilities, the President of the small West African nation promised a great deal with these pronouncements.

One thing that boded well for Benin's ambitions was that the African Union is in a much better state than its reputation suggests. Since its foundation in 2002, the Union has proved to be far more capable of taking action than its predecessor organisation, the Organisation for African Unity

1 | This article arose from a symposium in Cotonou from 17 to 21 July 2013 organised by the Regional Programme Political Dialogue West Africa of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung. The authors would like to thank Resident Representative Elke Erlecke and her trainee Franziska Porst for their invitation to the symposium.

(OAU). In fact, all international organisations demonstrate the same problem. Announcements are frequently followed by halting, patchy implementation. That is precisely why it is worth taking a closer look at the ambivalent legacy of Benin's AU presidency.

BRIEF OUTLINE OF BENIN'S AU PRESIDENCY

Benin's AU presidency stood under the ubiquitous motto "African solutions for African problems". This reflects the realisation that the "African sickness" (*le mal africain*)² – that vicious circle of dependency and underdevelopment – may have historic roots, but is now no longer predominantly exogenous, i.e. induced by the industrialised states of the north, but has to be understood as arising partly as the result of endogenous developments, above all problems of political and democratic dysfunction. African regional organisations destined to fulfil a number of generally accepted functions are to provide an answer. Pan-continental organisations such as the African Union and subregional integration mechanisms such as the Economic Community of West African States ECOWAS are intended to facilitate democratic oversight through a type of vertical division of powers, to help overcome obstacles to development in its member countries through exchange and sharing, and to make available resources for conflict resolution.

The foreign policy objectives of Boni Yayi's chairmanship at the strategic level were therefore first and foremost to encourage regional cooperation and a policy of good neighbourliness. The most important instrument was his international role as host and temporary spokesperson for Africa, which the function of AU Chairperson entails. Boni Yayi's foreign policy during Benin's AU presidency was intended to enhance the country's international profile, to find new partners and explore new regions for Benin political activities as well as producing greater visibility of the West African state in regional and international relations.

The general goals for the AU chairmanship defined by Benin were derived from the integration goals defined by the African Union itself: greater socioeconomic integration,

2 | Garga Haman Adj, *Le Mal Africain: Diagnostic et thérapie*, Harmattan, Cameroun, 2009.

strengthening of post-conflict reconstruction efforts, rationalisation of the administration of the African Union, and greater responsibility of the member states for pan-continental matters. In addition, other small African states had hoped that their wishes would find greater consideration within the AU under Benin's presidency. Within these general goals, Benin concentrated its activities on specific objectives during its AU chairmanship. The first prominent action was the promotion of an African presence at the G20 and G8. Here, Benin succeeded in the Chairperson of the African Union receiving regular invites to attend as an observer. Secondly, Benin was keen to secure a larger role for the regional organisations in post-conflict reconstruction activities. Thirdly, Benin sought a constructive relationship with the donor nations, for instance in the case of Mali. Fourthly and finally, Benin advocated automatic sanctions against member states in the event of violations of democratic principles, up to and including expulsion from the African Union; in this Benin followed the example of the preceding presidencies. The efforts in the first of these

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areas of activity resulted at least in a symbolic upgrading of Africa at two of the world's most important economic summits and in an improvement in the atmosphere in the relationship with the industrialised states.

To what extent the new observer status at the G20 and G8 will produce tangible improvements for the AU and for African states remains to be seen. The last three objectives are of immediate relevance to the systemic stability of the African continent.

ACHIEVEMENTS AND DIVIDENDS

Enforcement of Anti-Coup Principles

During the first decades after decolonisation, Africa in no way experienced the political and economic surge forward that the states that had gained their independence had hoped for. Instead, independence was followed by repeated phases of authoritarian government. Most heads of state did not lose their office through elections but through coups d'état. These were not always successful, but they were always numerous. Between 1956 and 2001, some

forty per cent of the coup attempts were successful,³ and between 1960 and 1979 alone, no fewer than 59 heads of government were deposed or assassinated whilst in office.⁴ Since the end of the Cold War, however, the number of successful coups has decreased. This is partly due to the fact that coup attempts frequently take a different form these days. While it used to be predominantly well organised overthrows conducted by leading military figures during the Cold War era, coups now tend to be conducted by lower ranks. However, particularly lower-ranking officers and NCOs mostly lack the capability to restore the command hierarchy following a coup, which causes further instability. Furthermore, unlike in former times, coups are predominantly a West African phenomenon, which hardly affects the African Union any more as a whole.⁵

When some African states embarked on the route towards democratisation in the 1990, while others did not, the African Union sought and found a solution to dealing with the diverse political circumstances, which was both pragmatic and face-saving. It did not demand that all states had to immediately engage in a process of democratisation but instead laid down the rule that all transfers of power had to be conducted in a democratic manner. It thereby accepted the status quo but ensured that democracy would gradually take root on the continent in the best case scenario. This does mean, however, that it is important to insist on adherence to this principle when there is a dictator heading the AU; even more than that: the dictator himself must do so. These principles were enforced in a number of cases over recent years in spite of difficult circumstances.

Under Benin's leadership, the African Union remained true to its principles. The coup in Guinea-Bissau in April 2012 resulted in the country's membership in the African Union being suspended, as was Mali's after the coup in 2012 there. When the Central African Republic was also

3 | Patrick J. McGowan, "African Military Coups d'état, 1956-2001: Frequency, Trends and Distribution", *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 41, No. 3, 2003, 339-370; idem, "Coups and Conflict in West Africa, 1995-2004", *Armed Forces and Society* 32, No. 2, 2006, 234-253.

4 | Goran Hyden, *African Politics in Comparative Perspective*, Cambridge University Press, 2006, 19.

5 | Jimmy Kandeh, *Coups from Below. Armed Subalterns and State Power in West Africa*, Houndsmills, 2004.

suspended, it was on account of serious political conflicts. The fact that such suspensions no longer cause any controversy is a good indication of a norm having been established – and that was a foundation that could be built on in 2013. On 5 July 2013, two days after the coup in Egypt, that country was suspended as well.



British Foreign Secretary William Hague visiting Ghanaian AFISMA troops in 2013: The AU mission in Mali is highly dependant on foreign aid. | Source: Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), flickr ©🇬🇧🇬🇧.

The Mali Crisis: a Test for the African Union

The fact that adhering to the principle of non-acceptance of coups occasionally has costly consequences became particularly clear during the crisis in Mali. Since the 1990s, Mali had been considered a state where democratic standards had become well-established despite widespread poverty. However, Mali had been under threat from a conflict between the government in Bamako and the Tuareg in the northeast of the country, which flared up in January 2012 when the Tuareg rebels took up arms against the government once again. The military was instructed to quash the rebellion, but felt that it had to a large extent been denied support in the fighting by the country's political elite. A few weeks before the presidential elections, the situation finally culminated in a coup in March 2012, during which President Amadou Toumani Touré was deposed by a small group of low-ranking officers led by Captain Amadou Sanogo.

The coup in Mali also demonstrated that coup attempts by lower-ranking officers fundamentally weaken the affected military. Not every colonel will easily accept the idea that he is supposed to execute the orders of a captain, as was the case in Mali.⁶

The coup was immediately followed by the suspension of the African Union membership as well as international sanctions. Although the African Union and the international community were thereby following a binding rule, this conduct produced a military vacuum in north-eastern Mali. Because of the international isolation, the army suddenly found itself without international assistance. In addition, it was no longer an efficient force acting in unity because of the takeover in Bamako. The vacuum was then filled not only by the Tuareg rebels but also, above all, by fundamentalist militias of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). The coup and the subsequent sanctions thereby accelerated the disintegration process of the Malian state. It was against this backdrop that ECOWAS planned military intervention. However, in spite of the increasingly threatening situation in Mali, the planning of this West African intervention proceeded ever more sluggishly which meant that it took an intervention by the French to save the country from disintegration or victory on the part of AQIM.

The crisis in Mali therefore posed several simultaneous problems to Benin's AU presidency. Firstly, it demonstrated that the intervention capability particularly in West Africa was still rather poor. Secondly, Boni Yayi found himself in the thankless position of having to defend France's intervention, which was ultimately the only alternative, but which many African elites viewed and still view as a neo-colonial action. And there ultimately remained the task of securing Mali militarily even after the French withdrawal. Even though there was some pan-African involvement, this task fell to ECOWAS, which sought to fulfil it with the African-led International Support Mission to Mali (AFISMA). It became clear once again in this context that the Community of West African States itself is only capable of action when regional power Nigeria becomes involved, as it is the only country with significant military

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capabilities without which no ECOWAS intervention would be sustainable. Notwithstanding these difficult circumstances, Boni Yayi succeeded in creating an astonishing degree of political unity on the continent.

Placing Benin onto the International Political Map and the Role Played by Boni Yayi

Especially in view of the rotating presidency of the AU, which, by its very nature, is not conducive to continuity of action, the gap between rhetoric and reality becomes particularly obvious.

Benin managed to upgrade the chairmanship of the African Union diplomatically and thereby endow it with a symbolic power that went beyond the purely ceremonial. However, especially in view of the rotating presidency of the AU, which, by its very nature, is not conducive to continuity of action, the gap between rhetoric and reality becomes particularly obvious. The office holders are tempted to make lofty declarations of intent, which are unlikely to be followed by political action due to the brevity of the term in office. What remains is the ephemeral memory of an ambitious presidency, which has to promise a great deal, but can in fact achieve little. Regardless of this, Boni Yayi's commitment has no doubt earned enhanced prestige for his country as well as for himself.

The foreign policy options of a small state are naturally limited. Particularly in a region such as West Africa with several major powers competing with each other and neighbouring conflicts that are conducted more or less openly, it is impossible for a stable regional hierarchy to develop, which would assign small states a position ensuring security and predictability for their foreign policy planning. As a subregional integration mechanism, ECOWAS has shown an astonishing institutional resilience. Nonetheless, the integration endeavours within ECOWAS regularly fall short of the expectations of its member states and of its own declarations of intent. In actual fact, particularly the small states such as Benin and Togo would benefit from better integration in West Africa.

It becomes apparent in this context that it is the other small states that one should compare Benin to within the African Union, disregarding its temporarily increased international presence. Benin wanted to rise into the

group of up-and-coming nations at least symbolically.⁷ The President's model for this is the foreign policy strategy of Rwanda, a country that has completed a speedy development from country in crisis to tiger state in the eyes of the international community since the 1990s. In Benin's case, there have been clear indications of attempts being made under Boni Yayi to construct such a success narrative. Benin has indeed become a regional economic and infrastructure hub thanks to its efficient port and its strategic location, acting in a distributor function to serve the hinterland (particularly Niger and Mali) and as a provider of reserve capacities for Nigerian ports, which are suffering from the effects of the difficult security situation.



Travelling diplomacy and personalisation of foreign policy: Benin's President Boni Yayi (r.), with his South African colleague Jacob Zuma in 2012. | Source: Siyabulela Duda, Government Communications (GCIS), Republic of South Africa ©📷📷.

Regional foreign policy can benefit small states both politically and economically. However, as the long-term nature of the impact of diplomatic initiatives hinders political

7 | The growth rate for the last three years was 2.6 per cent (2010), 3.5 per cent (2011) and 3.8 per cent (2012). Cf. "Benin", *The World Factbook*, CIA, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/bn.html> (accessed 18 Feb 2014). In direct comparison to Rwanda, which enjoyed growth rates of over seven per cent during this period, this initially appears too low to construct a solid "tiger state narrative". One has to remember, however, that Benin achieved this stable growth while the international financial crisis was still taking place and in an economically unstable region.

personalities being linked with the concrete achievements of such initiatives, i.e. the attribution of political achievements is very difficult, small states in particular rarely pursue regional foreign policy projects. In this respect, Benin's AU presidency made efforts to stand out from the regional norm.

Boni Yayi's ambitions in the area of foreign policy did result in increasing the visibility of Benin on the international stage. It also led to a stronger personalisation of foreign policy in the position of the Chairperson.

While Boni Yayi's efforts to fill the AU chairmanship with concrete projects indicate that he took his official duties seriously, they also reflect his personal ambition to qualify for higher posts at continental and global level.

The ambitions in the area of foreign policy did result in increasing the visibility of both Benin and of its President on the international stage, but it also led to a stronger personalisation of foreign policy in the position of the Chairperson. However, such personalisation is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it is a response to the lack of resources and the cumbersome nature of the administration; on the other hand, it makes the definition of national interests for the long term more difficult by encouraging the mixing of personal and national interests. It was not least for this reason that Boni Yayi's AU presidency with its continental and global ambitions was controversial at home, as it was not always clear to the population and the opposition where the borderline between the two was. There were therefore doubts about the purpose of Boni Yayi's travelling diplomacy involving trips to the Gulf and to the Far East, as those were not areas from which any new major direct investments or development aid were to be expected.⁸

It was therefore not least a president's personal conceit that foisted a foreign policy marathon on a small state, which directed valuable political attention away from domestic problems – particularly because it was in his personal interest to divert people from domestic failures. In part, Yayi pursued personal goals with the AU presidency that did not necessarily coincide with the country's interests. Having said that, examples of other small states show that

8 | There are some direct investments coming from China and on a smaller scale also from Japan. Japan is also one of the most important donor nations for Benin. But whether Benin's costly travelling diplomacy was really capable of providing new impulses here is doubtful.

foreign policy needs a certain degree of personalisation and can have implications for practical politics. The statesmanlike appearance of a cosmopolitan president can serve to build the brand of a state and enhance the reputation of the country in the international arena.⁹ Of course it is questionable whether a small state such as Benin should in fact play a prominent regional role if no vital interests are affected. These would be affected in the case of regional conflicts, for instance, which is why Boni Yayi's role during the conflict in Mali was acknowledged at home. However, for foreign policy to serve national interests and not exclusively those of the political elite a democratic basis and a dialogue with civil society is required. In a country that is still poorly developed such as Benin, the level of organisation in civil society is low in areas that are as far removed from the daily lives of large swathes of the population as foreign policy. Strong personalisation and concentration of power in this policy area are further hampering such civil society development.

CHALLENGES AND PROBLEMS

Outstanding Institutionalisation in Security Policy

The African Union's security policy problems in the face of the military conflicts in Sub-Saharan Africa are rooted in the continuing lack of proper institutions within the African security architecture. The African Union has nonetheless been able to record some remarkable achievements in creating peace and security. This applies particularly to the current mission of the African Union in Somalia, where years of efforts by the peace mission have resulted in stabilising the security situation.¹⁰

However, there remain some unresolved issues in this area of the African Union activities as well. Since its foundation, the AU has set itself very ambitious goals and founded the

9 | Uruguay could be a case in point, as its President Mujica is helping to enhance its reputation as an economic and tourism location. This effect is even more obvious in the case of Singapore, where the state founder Lee Kuan Yew enhances his country's reputation through his role of elder statesman, positively influencing Singapore's role in ASEAN and not least producing implications for economic policy.

10 | Dustin Dehez, "Neue Perspektiven für Somalia?", *Europäische Sicherheit und Technik* 62, No. 4, 2013, 102-104.

African security architecture on four pillars: there was to be a panel of experts (Panel of the Wise) to advise the Peace and Security Council of the African Union, a continental early warning system was intended to make crises and potential conflicts predictable and therefore manageable, a joint fund for deployments was to be created, and finally an African Intervention Force was to be set up.¹¹

However, there has been hardly any progress to speak of, particularly with respect to the creation of regional intervention capacities for the so-called African Standby Force (ASF), which were supposed to be set up in

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the different regions of the continent by the respective regional organisations, each contributing a brigade-size force.¹² Shortly after its foundation, the African Union decided that this intervention force should be ready for deployment by 2010, capable of preventing genocide and ending civil wars.¹³ The reality, however, is disillusioning. The current peace missions were mostly put together on an ad hoc basis; the ASF structures are rarely involved in the action, and if they are, as in the case of Sudan, then only thanks to cooperation with the United Nations. The fact that specifically the situation in Mali could not be stabilised until the French intervened also gave Yayi cause to critically assess the situation: "How can we understand that when danger threatened its very basis, Africa, which has the means to organise its own defence, continued to wait?"¹⁴

As justified as this criticism might be, the African Union has not had the funds that would be required to address all the conflicts in Africa. However, the model of externally funded African peace missions is not sustainable in the medium term because it does not provide adequate planning

11 | Nelson Alusala, "African Standby Force. East Africa Moves On", *African Security Review* 13, No. 2, Vol. 13, 2004, 113-121.

12 | Jakkie Cilliers, "The African Standby Force: An update on progress", *ISS Paper* 160, Institute for Security Studies (ISS), Mar 2008.

13 | Theo Neethling, "Realizing the African Standby Force as a Pan-African Ideal: Progress, Prospects and Challenges", *Journal of Military and Strategic Studies* 8, No. 1, 2005, 1-25.

14 | Quoted from: Jason Patinkin, "Can the AU Deliver Pax Africana?", in: *ThinkAfricaProgress*, 6 Feb 2013, <http://thinkafricapress.com/politics/pax-africana-au-security-development-mali-drc-car-somalia-darfur-sudan> (accessed 18 Feb 2014).

reliability, which is absolutely necessary for the pacification of areas involved in lengthy civil wars in particular. The AFISMA mission in Mali is the first mission that is partly financed directly from funds of the African Union – but even in this instance the African Union does not contribute more than ten per cent of the total costs of the mission, and the composition of the troops was once again determined on an ad hoc basis. Since then, the African Union has been able to agree on a new target date for the full deployment capability of the African Standby Force. 2015 is the new deadline, but this schedule is still highly ambitious – it could be considered an achievement if just two or three of the regional brigades could be set up by then.¹⁵ The current mission in Somalia is drawing attention to two other problems, which even a fully operational ASF would need to address. Numbering almost 18,000, the AMISOM force has reached a size that the ASF could never make available itself, let alone sustain. Secondly, even if they were to become fully operational, there would still be the question whether the regional intervention brigades should also be deployed in their own regions. This would create problems because most of the states within the regions are involved in disputes with each other.

A similar lack of progress can be attested to the continental early warning system for potential conflict (Continental Early Warning System, CEWARN), which was initiated many years ago with great fanfare and hope.¹⁶ This system too should be firmly established in the respective regions. It represents a large step forward at least in terms of concept: CEWARN is intended to not only analyse political developments, but also include other sources, from climate data to insights gained by non-government organisations. However, CEWARN never truly came to life. And Benin's presidency did not do much to revive this dormant piece of African security architecture.

15 | Judith Vorrath, "Schieflagen in der Afrikanischen Friedens- und Sicherheitsarchitektur", *SWP-Aktuell* 51, Aug 2012, http://swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/aktuell/2012A51_vrr.pdf (accessed 18 Feb 2014).

16 | Makumi Mwagiru, "The Legal Framework for CEWARN", in: Cirũ Mwaũra and Susanne Schmeidl (eds.), *Early Warning and Conflict Management in the Horn of Africa*, Red Sea Press, 2002, 69-97.

Consequences of the Election Campaign for the Position of AU Commission Chairperson

Boni Yayi's consensual election as Chairperson of the AU Assembly in January 2012 was overshadowed by a duel for the position of Chairperson of the AU Commission, which was in stark contrast to the normal culture of consensus of that institution. This is all the more astonishing as Commission-related elections are usually characterised by apathy and a lack of candidates.¹⁷ South Africa nominated its Interior Minister Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma against the incumbent Jean Ping from Gabon, who sought a further four-year term. South Africa justified its opposition to a second term for Ping mainly with his failure to enforce the influence and the primacy of the African Union against the Western powers during the crises in Libya and Ivory Coast.¹⁸

Dlamini-Zuma's nomination and the subsequent failure of either candidate to gain the required two-thirds majority resulted in the election being postponed to the AU summit in July, which led to a continuous six-month election campaign within the institution. Boni Yayi's urgent warning of a split and of the credibility loss that this would entail for the AU was not able to put a stop to it. With its nomination of Dlamini-Zuma, South Africa made few friends outside the regional South

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African Development Community (SADC) grouping, to which the country belongs, nor did it make many among the members of ECOWAS, which supported Jean Ping. Her candidature was generally received with mixed feelings. The objections were directed less against the person of Dlamini-Zuma than against the fact that a large African country violated the unwritten rule to allow this leadership position to go to one of the smaller African states. Another objection involved Kenya's support for a candidate of its own for the post of Deputy Chairperson. As there is another unwritten rule according to which the posts of Chairperson and Deputy Chairperson should be shared

17 | Mehari Taddele Maru, "Rethinking and reforming the African Union Commission elections", *African Security Review* 21, No. 4, Dec 2012, 64-78, here: 64.

18 | Farhiya Ali Ahmed, "AU Commission: Dlamini and Ping fight to a standstill", *African Business* 384, Mar 2012, 49.

between the francophone and anglophone camps, there was also concern in the English-speaking camp.¹⁹ Another thing that aroused misgivings was the euphoric reaction of the South African delegation to Ping's first defeat and the subsequent smear campaign by South Africa, which sought to present Ping as a selfish lackey of France.²⁰

The six-month election campaign emphasised the gulf between the anglophone and francophone countries in Africa, probably a calculated decision on South Africa's part.²¹

The election campaign had consequences for the relationship between the two African giants Nigeria and South Africa. Nigeria had supported and initiated many decisions taken by Ping.

But besides the language differences, the election campaign also had consequences for the relationship between the two African giants Nigeria and South Africa. Nigeria had supported and initiated many decisions taken by Ping. In Ivory Coast, Nigeria supported the elected challenger Ouattara, and in Libya, it ensured the speedy recognition of the National Transition Council, both against South Africa's will.²² With the election of its candidate, South Africa has asserted itself against the other large states in the region and won a symbolic victory on points. However, the high political cost of South Africa's chequebook diplomacy and the annoyance of the other dominant regional leading powers have cast a shadow over this achievement.

When Dlamini-Zuma was finally elected in July 2012 in the fourth round, she quickly asserted that she was standing as an individual and not as a South African delegate. Also, with the election of the Ethiopian Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn as Chairperson of the Assembly this year, the post went to a country that had opposed Dlamini-Zuma's candidature while its capital Addis Abeba furthermore serves as the base for the African Union. This can

19 | Svenja Ehinger, "Südafrikanerin führt künftig Afrikanische Union an", Country Report, Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, Jul 2012, 1, http://kas.de/wf/doc/kas_31739-1522-1-30.pdf (accessed 18 Feb 2014).

20 | Thomas Scheen, "Das ist ja der afrikanische Gipfel", *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 15 Jul 2012, <http://faz.net/aktuell/politik/ausland/-11819306.html> (accessed 18 Feb 2014).

21 | Cameron Duodu, "Is the AU fit for purpose?", *New African*, Aug-Sep 2012, 47.

22 | "The crucial election for the chair of the African Union", *The Pretoria News*, 30 Jan 2012.

probably be seen as a first attempt to limit the scope of the Commission Chairperson's action but also as an attempt by South Africa and Dlamini-Zuma to include former opponents and prevent a further split of the AU.

The battle for the post of Commission Chairperson illustrates the institutional dynamics of the African Union. On the one hand, major regional powers are the strong actors within an organisation that is formally based on equality between its member states. On the other hand, the administration is the real center of power in the AU – and not the AU presidency, which has a more ceremonial function. Accordingly, Boni Yayi could only look on while this battle was being fought out, not least because being a small state Benin only has limited symbolic and actual power within the circle of AU members.

African Union's Influence Increasing, ECOWAS' Influence Decreasing

The capacities of small states in the area of foreign policy are very limited. Their foreign ministries are generally poorly equipped both in terms of human resources and funding, not least because they do not contribute directly to the solving of domestic problems and are therefore not considered a spending priority. In a presidential system, they are also in competition with the presidential office. The problem of coherence is exacerbated by the fact that states are (and probably have to be) active at several "diplomatic levels" today.²³ In the case of Benin, this involves the regional integration associations at subregional level (mainly ECOWAS) and at continental level (mainly the AU), which require constant attention and which overlap in many subject areas, but in most cases do not complement one another. The increased activism and gains in influence at continental level therefore initially worked to the detriment of Benin's role in its own region. In fact, West Africa's integration mechanisms are in crisis and are in dire need of attention from its member states.²⁴ Small

23 | Slaughter calls this "networked power". Anne-Marie Slaughter, "America's Edge: Power in the Networked Century", *Foreign Affairs*, No. 1, Vol. 88, 2009, 94-113.

24 | Besides the frequently reported democratic setbacks, which still suggest a fragile democratic consensus in West Africa even a quarter of a century after the end of the Cold War and in ▶

states are therefore overtaxed by the need to engage in regional multi-level diplomacy by the above-mentioned lack in capacity and the high expectations placed in them. While they could attempt to utilise regional organisations for their own concerns, bureaucratic inertia within the AU apparatus and path dependences influencing regional policy mean that regional organisations such as the AU cannot easily change their course. Regional initiatives in the area of development also require large funds, most of which the great powers among the AU members would have to provide. This is why policies in the AU are also devised to a very large extent by the leading regional powers, which can bolster their ambitions by hosting special summits

or establishing special funds, for instance.²⁵ When there is no expectation of a substantial contribution from the Chairperson's own country such as Benin, setting the priorities therefore remains in the hands of the leading regional powers – unless these can be persuaded in bilateral negotiations to assist in solving specific problems in the small states. An AU chairmanship can produce visibility and sympathy in this context, but it can also be to the detriment of this bilateral level. Having said that, Benin's presidency still has a place in a "policy of attracting the major powers" devised for the long term.

Concentration on the continental level in foreign policy does not necessarily bring greater benefits for small states. On the one hand, continental integration theoretically promises more significant economies of scale in the economy and a larger political arena. On the other hand, subsidiarity considerations produce greater scope for action at a sub-regional level. In the case of West Africa, there are already regional mechanisms in place for developing the infrastructure, deepening economic integration and financial policy as well as for (robust) conflict resolution. This all points to Benin's interests clearly lying at the subregional level.

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spite of development progress, ECOWAS still falls short of its own goals and hopes in terms of economic integration and infrastructure as well.

25 | On such regional hierarchies cf. David Lake, "Regional Hierarchy: authority and local international order", *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 35, Feb 2009, Supplement 1, 35-58.

What motivates Benin to change to the continental level in its foreign policy in this scenario is mainly based on considerations about “strategic sidestepping”. Such a strategy is pursued by politicians in the hope that a change in diplomatic level will produce an improvement in their own national position.²⁶ They accept the uncertainty of gaining benefits from their foreign policy activities at the alternative level if the originally preferred level falls short of its efficiency potential. Following this logic, Benin’s strengthened presence at the AU level is a signal indicating that it does not see its interests sufficiently realised at the ECOWAS level. Accordingly, the problem for Benin lies at the subregional level, in the partial paralysis of ECOWAS, which is wearing itself out through the competition between the major subregional powers, which means that small states can no longer get a hearing. Due to the fragility of most ECOWAS member states, West Africa has become identified as a “crisis region” to such an extent both in African and global public opinion that even relatively stable states such as Benin are having an image problem – with negative consequences for their economies. On a stage such as that provided by the AU presidency, Benin is able to counter this ruinous development – enveloped by the institutional and symbolic mantle of an integration project that still conveys a positive message.

Ministerial Bureaucracy: What Achievements Did the African Union Produce?

While Benin’s AU chairmanship is generally celebrated as a great achievement, there are some voices particularly in Benin complaining that it costs the small country too many resources and that Yayi above all had benefited personally from the presidency. They maintain that the Benin Foreign Ministry in particular was simply too small for such an active role and had therefore neglected other matters, at regional level for instance. This overtaking of Benin’s capacities initially appears surprising, as the role of Chairperson of the Assembly was, after all, earmarked for smaller countries. However, the occasional overtaking of the structures indicates that in fulfilling his AU presidency,

The occasional overtaking of the structures indicates that in fulfilling his AU presidency, Boni Yayi took on tasks that had not been intended for him.

26 | Christian E. Rieck, “Balancing Brazil: Foreign Policy Strategies of Secondary Powers”, unpublished manuscript.

Boni Yayi took on tasks that had not been intended for him – particularly as the position does not come with supporting staff, unlike the temporary Chairman of the European Council.

The role of Chairperson of the Assembly is devised as a ceremonial role, with some procedural functions during Assembly sessions. Beyond that, the role of the post derives from the personality of the incumbent.²⁷ Are we therefore dealing with an internationalist whim of Yayi's or even with a desire for personal advantage?

Ultimately, we are dealing above all with a very special situation, where Boni Yayi used the political importance that the chairmanship entails to gain a reputation as an international statesman.²⁸ This exceptional situation was due to the fact that the chairmanship of the Commission was deadlocked by an election campaign and a subsequent determination phase during the first half of his term in office. It was therefore left to Boni Yayi alone to undertake extensive diplomatic efforts to manage disagreements in the Assembly and to address problems at numerous trouble spots around the continent. At the same time, the lack of a strong and visible counterpart within the AU also allowed him larger political scope.

Particularly in questions of regional security, the role of the Chairperson ultimately remains undefined and dependent on circumstances and personalities. Boni Yayi picked up on this issue in his farewell speech, when he demanded a clearer role allocation between the chair of the AU Assembly, the chair of the AU Commission or the commissioner for peace and security.²⁹ According to Article 3, Paragraph 2 of the statutes of the AU Commission, the Commission

27 | Babatunde Fagbayibo, "The (Ir)relevance of the Office of the Chair of the African Union Commission: Analysing the Prospects for Change", *Journal of African Law* 56, No. 1, 2012, 15-28, here: 30.

28 | Simon Allison, "Business as usual at the AU (and it's a good thing too)", *Daily Maverick*, 28 Jan 2013, <http://dailymaverick.co.za/article/2013-01-28-business-as-usual-at-the-au-and-its-a-good-thing-too> (accessed 18 Feb 2014).

29 | "A Timbuktu Moment for the African Union", *The Africa Report*, 8 Mar 2013, <http://theafricareport.com/News-Analysis/a-timbuktu-moment-for-the-african-union.html> (accessed 18 Feb 2014).

shall represent the Union and defend its interests (under the guidance of and as mandated by the Assembly and the Executive Council).³⁰ It became clear even before Boni Yayi's presidency that the AU Chairperson is sometimes better placed to fulfil this role due the intergovernmental character of the post. However, this would require dedicated staff so that the AU Chairperson does not have to tie up the minimal resources of their own (usually smaller) country.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

What is the legacy of the AU presidency within Benin? Firstly, there are the costs of the foreign policy marathon in terms of finances and domestic policy. It was not clear to everybody what the President actually wanted on the global stage. Secondly, the perception of Benin on the continent and globally has improved in spite of this and has resulted in greater visibility of the country and an upgrading of its "foreign policy brand". Thirdly, the administration and politicians have gained valuable experiences in international dealings, with a positive impact on the professionalisation of the state apparatus. Fourthly, there remains the two-sided impact of the role played by Boni Yayi. The illustrious legacy of his AU presidency entails an enhanced degree of personalisation and concentration of power in the area of foreign policy, which resulted in a further loss of support at home. There is no doubt, however, that he has also personally gained in stature internationally.

Benin's presidency suffered from a sprawling agenda. During a term lasting just one year, it is hardly possible to achieve substantial progress in all areas, and Boni Yayi also succumbed to the temptation to define as many objectives as possible, mostly of a nebulous nature, during his term in office. At least, Benin succeeded

At least, Benin succeeded in strengthening essential principles of the African Union and, in particular, in establishing the anti-coup principle more firmly.

in strengthening essential principles of the African Union and, in particular, in establishing the anti-coup principle more firmly. There is in fact a regional norm beginning to emerge in this respect. In order to effectively enhance the security provisions for Africa, the planning for an African Stand-By Force must be pursued purposefully, particularly

30 | Fagbayibo, n. 27, 17.

with respect to a common funding basis and stable structures. High priority must be given specifically to securing solid commitments from donor countries and from nations providing troops in this connection.

However, the AU presidency has also shown the difficulties facing poorly developed small states such as Benin in exercising the role of continental spokesperson. The regional and global duties divert valuable political attention away from addressing domestic problems – regardless of whether this was a desired side effect as in the case of Benin. A lack of capacities in the area of foreign policy also means that when activities are transferred to the continental level, the subregional level (which was more important in the case of Benin) suffers neglect. It should be possible to at least ameliorate this administrative bottleneck through support with training and with reducing bureaucracy. And up-skilling at the Foreign Ministry could counter the concentration of power in the office of President. The same ultimate goal would be served by measures taken by donors to strengthen civil society actors as well as the dialogue between them and politicians (in this case for the purpose of monitoring and providing guidance for national foreign policy), which is still very poorly developed in Benin. No doubt there are more important development priorities (focusing on domestic policy) in Benin, but a foreign policy firmly rooted in civil society and the rule of law would strengthen the function of a stable democracy as a model for a region of the world where democratic consensus remains very fragile. Benin's AU presidency has shown that even small states can render valuable services to their region through their actions.