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Africa: Conflict Management and Hopes of Better Governance

African economic growth is recovering slightly. The African Development Bank estimates a rate of 3.6% for 2003. However, this is well below the average of 7% needed to meet the UN Millennium Development Goal of halving the number of people living in absolute poverty by 2015. Hopes of reaching this goal are dwindling given the numerous, more or less bloody, conflicts within and between African countries, the prevalence of autocratic structures and reform resistance as well as weak political and economic management. At present, Africa's bloody hot spots are inducing growing international attention, some contributions to crisis management and – more general – efforts for better governance. What can be expected from the initiatives which have been taken recently by the USA, the EU and by African countries themselves?

President Bush's visit to Africa was much anticipated in this respect. In his National Security Strategy Paper last year he announced that the USA would identify anchor countries as strategic partners in Africa, cooperate with the European allies for constructive conflict mediation and successful peace operations, and strengthen states and institutions capable of reform. African partners have already been selected according to their commitment to good governance under the African Growth and Opportunity Act of May 2000. As a reward AGOA offers preferential access to the US market.

Although Bush has committed himself to a whole collection of the continent's issues, from the crises in Liberia, Congo and the Sudan to the fight against HIV/Aids, his trip ended with meagre results. This holds particularly true for conflict management. As to Liberia, he was very much hesitant to enter into another heavy military involvement. For Bush, Liberia is not Iraq and Somalia is still an American trauma. Therefore, he has made no decisive commitment yet for the envisaged peace-keeping mission to be powered mainly by Liberia's West African neighbours. However, without a minimum of US military presence it hardly appears possible to get rid of Charles Taylor's brutal regime. As to more democracy in Africa, Bush also made no noticeable contribution when meeting authoritarian leaders like Museveni (Uganda) and Obasanjos (Nigeria). Instead, he refrained from directly criticising Robert Mugabe (Zimbabwe) and again left this to South Africa's President Mbeki and his "quiet diplomacy".

However, Bush's visit to the region was not about conflicts alone. Economic interests also played a considerable role. Africa is of strategic importance to the USA given its notable oil resources, which offer an opportunity to reduce US dependency on Middle East suppliers. Today, 15% of US oil imports come from West Africa and are projected to rise to 25% in the next 10 years. And last but not least, Bush's trip had much to do with terrorism. He is ready to spend some \$ 100 million for efforts against unstable countries that could potentially harbour terrorist activity.

Not only the USA, but the EU as well is trying to contribute to conflict mediation in Africa, whereby its own political and economic interests play a similar role. Recent examples are the EU sanctions against Zimbabwe and the EU peace-keeping mission in the Congo – the first one outside Europe – as well as efforts to intensify the European-African policy dialogue. However, the size and impact of the EU's commitment have also been rather limited so far. Like the USA, EU countries are very reluctant to get too involved in Africa's often complex and violent conflicts. Diverging national interests in the EU and the absence of a Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) also play a role. The second EU-Africa summit planned for April this year demonstrates the EU's dilemma. Due to dissent on Zimbabwe's participation, the summit has been postponed indefinitely. Although EU sanctions against Zimbabwe have been extended for another year, the EU allowed France to hold its own regular Franco-African summit in Paris – with Zimbabwe's president Mugabe.

Unfortunately, the draft EU constitution presented in July is unlikely to give the EU a clearer voice and stronger stand in foreign affairs, because in the case of the CFSP it does not allow for qualified majority voting in general. Moreover, the constitution alone will hardly provide more coherence and effectiveness to the EU's development cooperation. Although the latter is positioned under the primacy of the CFSP, it will virtually remain under the responsibility of the individual member states. Hence, the EU's diverging foreign and development policies could also continue to affect its association policies.

It might thus be difficult for the EU in some cases to utilise the political provisions of the Cotonou Agreement with the African, Caribbean and Pacific countries effectively. Since previous cooperation conventions had suffered considerably from the disastrous political and economic situation in many of the ACP countries, the EU insisted on the inclusion of the strengthening of the political dialogue on democratisation, human rights, peace and security in the new Agreement. The partner countries accepted the EU's demand for the inclusion of good governance, the periodic review of compliance with this principle and the option to suspend the provisions of the Agreement in case of a severe violation, of which the EU has made use several times (Zimbabwe, Côte d'Ivoire, Fiji, Haiti).

There are still not enough African countries taking responsibility and action for a radical change towards better governance. According to the World Economic Forum's latest ranking, Tunisia, Angola, Gambia, South Africa and Mauritius belong to a small group of promising reformers and performers. And recently, Kenya has been starting a most impressive breach with its former authoritarian and corrupt system.

Broader African initiatives like the African Union (AU) project and the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), which was integrated into the AU process as a reform strategy last year, have been raising hopes for political and economic stabilisation and reforms in an increasing number of countries. But the long and frustrating record of programmes for Africa's recovery and pan-African unification does not justify unconditional optimism.

Nevertheless, the explicit commitment to self-responsibility, to human rights, good governance and a common responsibility for conflict mediation and peace-keeping appears at least to be a promising rhetoric paradigm shift after decades of blaming (neo-)colonialism as the real cause of Africa's poverty. As the summit in July has demonstrated, the AU is in its infant stage and remains a long-term vision. At present, the AU is preoccupied with tedious institution-building and is far removed from policy design and common action. This is not surprising given the enormous diversity of its members and interests. Why should Africa integrate faster than the EU did?

However, there are expectations that NEPAD might stimulate some national efforts towards better governance in the nearer future, especially after the G8 countries announced their readiness last year to provide rewards in the form of a "preferred partnership" as part of their Plan of Action. G8 support could increasingly be linked to the results of NEPAD's African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM), which is under construction now. Similar to the OECD reviews, it is intended to monitor African countries' adherence to codes of good political and economic governance regularly on a voluntary basis. So far only 17 countries are prepared to be reviewed. But even a small number of initial member states could induce others to join the "club of the willing and successful" sooner or later. The APRM already serves as a litmus test for the credibility of African reformers. In addition, the results of the APRM could be used to test the credibility of donors. But donors can provide much more than their Plan of Action. A substantial reform of their agricultural and trade policy is overdue and would be necessary to turn the Doha Round into a real development round.

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