

Comments on Africa

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A Huge Step for Women? Dlamini-Zuma and the African Union Commission

By Awino Okech¹

I have watched and listened with interest at the ululations surrounding Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma's election as the new head of the African Union (AU) commission. The ululations have been framed first as a gender victory and then more broadly. I would like to urge caution to the growing voices hailing the power of women and the changes that will follow because we now have the first woman at the helm of the African Union commission. Let me put the detractors rhetoric to rest; I do not urge caution, because women are their own worst enemies. From a purely women's movement perspective, this is a victory to be celebrated, primarily because the patriarchal nature of our societies makes such an achievement a significant milestone. Seventeen years after the United Nations Beijing conference on women, the 'playing field' in terms of equal access whether it is framed through education, the economy and most importantly social and cultural frameworks that reassert gendered hierarchies have not been dismantled.

However, in terms of advancing the discourse on women's leadership we² must begin to debunk the naturalised assumptions about how women and men conduct service. Universal claims about women are invariably false and effectively normalise and privilege specific forms of femininity and in turn masculinity. I believe that we need to recognise that Dlamini-Zuma represents multiple

interests. Her gender is just one of the many identities she negotiates alongside being a South African, a Zulu, a politician, a veteran of South Africa's liberation struggle and the list goes on. Her gender I dare say will not be primary determinant of her leadership scorecard if you will at the AU commission.

To give Dlamini-Zuma's leadership at the commission a fair chance we must nuance this gender victory and engage the context of her candidature in order to make it work for 'us'. Most immediately, we must re-engage the AU actively and re-write the silence that characterised civil society organizations interaction with the AU during the leadership impasse between January and July 2012. Like the Jean Ping-Libya situation where the AU felt that Africa misread its actions because they were not publicized, civil society actors interested in the AU can argue that behind closed doors, they lobbied African state representatives to work towards a resolution on the AU commission leadership.

Nonetheless, in the public theatre, it appears that we left the decision on who would run the commission and steer the Union to the politicians. We constructed it as a space in which we would have no influence even within the court of public opinion. We waited for direction from the political class with whom we have had deep concerns about their responses to various crises on the continent – both overt and covert – Kenya, Zimbabwe, Madagascar, Libya, Cote d'Ivoire and Mali are a few examples. To assume now that with a woman at the helm, automatic access is guaranteed and a different modus operandi will be encouraged is at best presumptuous.

Our failure to exercise leadership during this period must be reclaimed through renewed concerted conversations with the new leadership of the AU and to reclaim

in tangible terms that the Union is in service of African peoples. That cannot be done on the basis of the gender card but must be done in the context of the bureaucratic cultures Dlamini-Zuma is bound to confront in the Union. Dismantling these insidious institutional cultures do not rely solely on her experience but on the support both internally and externally to enable that shift. Dlamini-Zuma's much touted success at the South African Ministry of Home Affairs was based on a coherent government mandate to go in and transform it. This is not the same set of circumstances that shape her entry into the commission that guides what is primarily a political body.

Secondly, the circumstances that led to Dlamini-Zuma's position at the helm of the commission have been characterized by multiple concerns. It would be short sighted of us to dismiss them and reduce this to "a woman going to show the men how it is done". There have been multiple analyses offered on the commission leadership impasse, which I do not wish to rehearse here except through a summary. Despite popular perception, it has been argued in many African diplomatic spaces that most African leaders were not pleased with the turn of events in Libya, which was unfortunately framed by their 'consent'³ to the now infamous United Nations Security Council resolution 1973. There has been squabbling over whether the resolution was explicit about regime change and whether indeed African leaders in interpreting 'by any means necessary' refused to see how that enabled North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) to happen on Libya. Perhaps this was the proverbial straw on the camel's back that in effect split African nations in terms of being able to coalesce African interests at a global instead of prioritising national interests because of foreign financial flows for budgetary support. It is a fact that Africa was divided internationally on Libya and NATO.

But Libya only had an accumulated effect after the failure of the AU to offer decisive public and continental leadership on the Cote d'Ivoire crisis, which was in the end resolved through the heavy intervention of former colonial power France. Again the AU would argue that in instances where the sub-regional body has shown leadership in the matter like ECOWAS did, their role is to reinforce those efforts and not to superimpose its solutions. After all the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA) finds contextual interpretation through similar frameworks in sub-regional organisations.

In both cases though, South Africa as one of Africa's strong states played a central role. Some may argue that the

turn of events in Libya that can be read as a re-assertion of imperialism or the treatment of the Mbeki and subsequent Jacob Zuma led mediation efforts in Cote d'Ivoire slighted one of Africa's giants. It is here that the question of South Africa's hegemonic interests must be understood and the Dlamini-Zuma candidature as representative of Southern Africa located. I do not argue that South Africa's interests both economic and political have not been pursued in other ways. South Africa's economic imprint through diverse business interests some more visible than others such as the almost ubiquitous presence of *Woolworths*, *Shoprite*, *Mr. Price*, *MTN* and cable television provider *DSTV* in major capitals across Africa is evident. Most of our countries on the other hand do not necessarily enjoy the same opportunities in a highly protected business environment in South Africa

Whether we believe that unwritten rules cannot be broken, the insistence by South Africa that Dlamini-Zuma's candidature was a sub-regional response in a context where it wields enormous economic, political and cultural weight is a fallacy. A useful analogy here is the unlikely insistence by the USA to field a secretary general for the United Nations (UN). Admittedly, the USA and other economic and political actors heavyweights exercise their power through permanent membership of the powerful United Nations Security Council but to insist on exercising that power more broadly within the UN would further destabilise the delicate balance of power and principles, which even if only normatively, frame that body. The possibility of positioning and pursuing the candidature of a seemingly neutral Southern African state through an equally suitable candidate could have been explored.

Dlamini-Zuma's impeccable credentials are not at issue here. The bane of her tenure will be characterized by her ability to manage the perception of states that view South Africa as over-bearing, a position that is not simply limited to a Francophone/Anglophone divide. While arguments have been made about Dlamini-Zuma's pan African credentials she has foregrounded her South African heritage as an essential part of who she is and it is these identities that will shape the lenses with which her every decision is interpreted. The likelihood that gender will become the scapegoat that is used to rationalize Dlamini-Zuma's unpopular decisions cannot be wished away. If I draw an analogy to Barrack Obama's presidency, the arguments about his lack of foreign policy experience in addition to decisions that have been constructed as both unpopular by the opposition or unaccept-

able by the Black community because he is the first Black president are likely to occur to Dlamini-Zuma as well.

Do we expect a radical reduction in the spikes of sexual and gender based violence during situations of armed conflict? Do we anticipate a more nuanced engagement around peace security issues on the continent without relating questions of gender equality to women's issues alone but instead construct it as one of the central determinants of how we understand the inequalities of the society more broadly? I don't think these can be central factors or expectations against which we in the movement assess Dlamini-Zuma's tenure. Unfortunately a gender celebration frames it as such.

Dlamini-Zuma has a tough balancing act, which like Obama involves illuminating the complexities of identity and belonging and this automatically leaves most disappointed. This involves demonstrating that she is not only a South African woman candidate but also a leader that brings a holistic perspective to her position. She has the unenviable task of seeking to reverse neo-imperialist gains, which I suspect informed South Africa's keen interest on this seat in terms of shifting geo-political dynamics. This will be done against the stark realities of nations whose budgets are highly dependent on the West and this inadvertently shapes their foreign policy decisions. Most immediately there is a perceived Francophone/Anglophone divide that she has the task of remedying despite being constructed as central to cementing that divide. This is in addition to a host of active and latent conflicts raging across the continent.

Support Dlamini- Zuma we must, but the women's movement must be alive to the fact that her gender will be the scapegoat for any unpopular decisions she makes. We must not place analysis in the public domain that makes this 'excuse' a foregone conclusion in a context where gender is easily mobilized to 'explain' away inefficiency and inexperience. As the women's movement we must resist the urge to be drawn into comparative analysis based on her predecessor as a man and her as a woman. Let us claim this opportunity to reverse essentialised notions about women's leadership and instead up the ante on debates on transformative leadership more broadly through an emphasis on dismantling prohibitive bureaucratic cultures within institutions such as the African Union and transforming the analytical basis on which gender discourses are framed as critical to this shift. The women versus men dichotomy, does not move us towards a transformation platform. ■

Endnotes

- 1 Awino Okech has contributed broadly to intellectual and programmatic initiatives on women's rights with a focus on conflict and post-conflict settings. This has occurred through her work as the regional gender and conflict thematic lead for ACORD, as a writer including co-editing with 'Funmi Olonisakin *Women and Security Governance in Africa* (2011) and her contributions to undergraduate teaching at the University of Cape Town's African Gender Institute. Her research interests lie in the area of gendered citizenship, culture and nationalism/s.
- 2 I use "we" in recognition of the fact that I have contributed to and continue to engage various formations that constitute the women's movement on the African continent.
- 3 This is a contentious term when one understands how power and oppression operate.

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