

How Africa can respond to the seismic changes in the world: lessons from history

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Fundamental changes are taking place in the world: what are the implications for Africa?

A generation ago, newly appointed Organisation of African Unity (OAU) Secretary-General Dr Salim Ahmed Salim posed that question under circumstances different from today, but of comparable significance.

Two strategic shifts marked the early 1990s. The first was the sudden collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, with implications for Africa. The second was the winding down of colonialism as white-minority rule came to an end in southern Africa.

Today, Africa faces sudden changes in renewed tensions. This has been crystallised by a number of developments. These include the war in Ukraine, a new Cold War and the rise of China as a global power. These are unfolding against the backdrop of changes in global economics and society resulting from the COVID pandemic, climate change and the fourth industrial revolution.

Salim and his team prepared a report for the July 1990 26th Ordinary Assembly of African Heads of State and Government that met in Addis Ababa. After much debate the summit issued a declaration. Its title was: “The Political and Socio-Economic Situation in Africa and the Fundamental Changes Taking Place in the World”.

Diplomatic historians regard the 1990 OAU declaration as the starting point for a decade-long series of policy and economic developments that culminated in the transformation of the OAU into the African Union (AU).

Politically astute African leadership in 1990 overcame diverse identities and interests to eventually agree on a new set of principles. These enabled the reform of Africa’s main inter-governmental institutions and processes.

However imperfect, AU norms and institutions have been sustainable and politically useful for two decades. Peace has prevailed among virtually all AU members. More challenging has been building AU consensus for new ways to prevent and resolve conflicts within states. This is particularly notable in the politically sensitive area of democratic elections.

History does not repeat itself, but it has lessons to teach.

The 1990 exercise boiled down to three core components that are worth recalling: governance and preventing deadly conflict, socio-economic integration and leadership and institutional reform.

There is little doubt that in 2022 the world is in the midst of another inflection point that few predicted – or prepared for. I believe there are lessons to be learned from the analytical framework used by Salim in 1990 and the OAU's Declaration about the implications for Africa. Although today's changes may require broader civic involvement.

Governance and preventing deadly conflict

The AU's Constitutive Act and the African Charter on democracy, elections and governance recognise that the most deadly conflicts in Africa occur within, not between or among countries. A case in point was the 1994 Rwanda genocide.

In 1990 Salim clarified the strategic importance of good governance as the foundation for national and regional integration. That year's declaration endorsed the goals of respect for human rights and democratisation. This foreshadowed the emergence of the "principle of non-indifference" when it comes to the risk of violent domestic conflict.

Early warning signals include:

- Severe human rights abuses
- Blatant violations of electoral integrity
- Unconstitutional changes of government, and
- A breakdown in the rule of law.

An urgent question today is whether escalating tensions and competition among China, Russia and the US, and their non-African allies, will impede Africa's democratisation. And will they abet domestic abuses of power that threaten to undermine peace and prosperity, as well as national and regional integration?

Socio-economic integration

Africa is feeling the effects of accelerating globalisation socially as well as economically.

In 1991 African leaders began mounting their response with the adoption of the Abuja Treaty establishing the African Economic Community. But ambitious goals that were envisioned to be realised over six stages (1994-2027) have not been met.

Amid the current escalating competition for markets and influence in Africa among the major powers, Africa's collective agency needs to be reassessed. This is true for each of the eight AU affiliated regional economic communities too. Can Africans devise practical ways to entice all major powers to support the African Continental Free Trade Area?

Africa's socio-economic resilience and recovery was tested recently during the COVID pandemic. Wealthy Western democracies turned inward and practised vaccine nationalism. This hardship exacerbated inequalities and disproportionately hurt the poorest Africans.

The war in the Ukraine over the past two months is already severely affecting the continent. A dire impact on food prices, and food and nutrition security in Africa is already being felt. The implications for global food supply chains and food trade in Africa are also serious.

Among other alarming implications of the war in Ukraine for Africa are the curtailment of development assistance and other needed support to mitigate the effects of global climate change.

Africa is the region most vulnerable to climate change for which it is least responsible. And it has the greatest need for financial assistance in dealing with climate change.

Leadership and institutional reform

The 1990 strategic review that Salim undertook sought a major revamp of the OAU. It is too early to judge the need, capacity, and resolve of AU members to undertake major reforms of their continental and regional organisations. The last big institutional reform took over a decade to effect, and results inevitably have been mixed.

But it will take leadership to generate sustained and politically salient debate about the necessity of institutional reforms. The transition to the AU also required leadership by African statesmen, notably by Thabo Mbeki of South Africa and Nigeria's president Olusegun Obasanjo.

Africa's regional international relations today appear to lack the central leadership that was possible during Salim's era. And African democracies, as those elsewhere, are preoccupied with voter interests. These rarely focus on foreign affairs. Autocratic rulers may have more freedom to lead regionally. But they are handicapped by a lack of democratic legitimacy.

A different approach

Today's challenges may require a more bottom-up approach, with key inputs from non-governmental leaders. This year's declaration against unconstitutional changes of government, for example, involved a much wider array of players. Hosted by Ghana for the AU and affiliated inter-governmental organisations, it included representatives from a broad spectrum of society. These included African civil society organisations, academia, professional bodies, youth and women's groups.

Having these representatives in the room might produce practical recommendations to help Africa adapt to fundamental changes in the world, consistent with African norms and interests.

Author



1. **John J Stremlau**

Honorary Professor of International Relations, University of the Witwatersrand

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