

“Africa’s place is within the Global South”, according to Mahmoud Ali Youssouf

Interview by Mahdi A., February 2025

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As the race for the presidency of the African Union Commission intensifies, Mahmoud Ali Youssouf – Minister for Foreign Affairs since 2005 and a leading figure in continental diplomacy – embodies a bold vision for Africa. Bolstered by unprecedented popular support, this multilingual Djiboutian candidate champions an inclusive vision: peace, economic sovereignty and youth at the heart of the continental agenda.

In this exclusive interview with Human Village, he reflects on the challenges of his campaign, reveals his strategy for winning over reluctant states and answers difficult questions head-on – ranging from foreign interference to the credibility of African elections, and including the critical project of the Continental Free Trade Area. What approaches is he using to win over African heads of state? And above all, how can he embody the hope of a united Africa in a fragmented world? We seek answers from a man who, behind a diplomatic composure, displays a determination to ‘silence the guns and ignite opportunities’. Published on 7 February 2025, eight days before Mahmoud Ali Youssouf’s election as Chairperson of the African Union Commission.

Were you moved by the massive mobilisation of the Djiboutian people, who turned out in huge numbers on 1 February to support your candidacy for the AU?

Mahmoud Ali Youssouf: I was very moved. I was abroad as part of my campaign at the time of this event. I was in Senegal to meet President Bassirou Diomaye Diakhar Faye, and straight afterwards I travelled to Egypt to present my candidacy and my ambitions for the continent to President Abdel Fattah Al-Sissi. So I was following these popular demonstrations from afar. I believe our people have embraced this candidacy as a national cause. That is how I explain it to myself. This fervour, this enthusiasm, everyone rallying to support my candidacy. I think it is patriotism that is being expressed through this popular support. I was very moved by it; in fact, I sent a message of thanks to the participants in both Afar and Somali. So really, it truly warms my heart, and I have thanked them and continue to thank them.

Djiboutians have, on several occasions and without success, stood as candidates for senior posts in multilateral organisations. Were these bitter failures? In your view, what did they lack to succeed? And how do you intend to make a difference now that you yourself are a candidate?

‘Bitter’ – I wouldn’t use that word, but I do think we learn from these failures first and foremost. And what you need to realise is that these are posts for which representatives from around 55 countries are competing. So it’s not easy; the competition is very tough – that’s the first point. The other factor that may have caused a number of our ambitions to fall short is the fact that we didn’t start early enough to win people over and, above all, to prepare our candidates for a competition which, I would remind you, is extremely tough, primarily due to the calibre of the candidates put forward, their profiles and their experience. And I believe it’s a question of preparation. You have to start well in advance; you have to win people over; you have to run a grassroots campaign, visit countries and their capitals, and commit the necessary resources, because this sort of election isn’t won solely through speeches and slogans. You need resources, and so on. Perhaps that’s what we’ve been missing. You have to

meet people, appear on television programmes, give interviews and hold press conferences. And all of that costs money. You need to have all these channels at your disposal and plan all these activities.

Do demographic and/or geographical factors also play a part here? Djibouti's small size compared to Nigeria, for example?

Let's say that countries do have influence. And that influence is not solely linked to size. There are very small countries that are highly influential and large countries that are not. Size is not necessarily a decisive factor in this sort of analysis. But what you need to understand is that your country's role in the continent's major issues – peace, stability, the fight against terrorism, conflict resolution – all these factors are weighed up when the Head of State selects a candidate from a particular country. So you cannot limit yourself to just one or two considerations. There are many factors that come into play when it comes to standing for such an important position at the continental level.

Many Djiboutians are wondering what your election might mean for the Republic of Djibouti. How would you respond to them?

Why do Djiboutians feel so involved and committed to this election, as if they were part of it themselves? Firstly, because I am a Djiboutian. That is a natural and immediate answer. When a Djiboutian is in the running, Djiboutians rally round. It is, I would say, an automatic reaction that should come as no surprise. Secondly, this also shows that people in our country stand together. It's a sign of solidarity; it's important to recognise that. They need to come together on major occasions and for important causes. The people are there; they're patriotic; they stand together. And finally, I believe I've been around the political and diplomatic scene for a few decades now, and I think the people of Djibouti know me.

Does the Kenyan candidate claim to have the support of several African countries for his candidacy? For example, Algeria, as President Ruto tweeted; or Uganda, as President Museveni has stated; or Rwanda, Tanzania and South Sudan, as the press keeps reporting. How do you view the support he claims to have? Do you also have declared supporters? Which ones? Which countries are you counting on most?

It's a question of strategy. Personally, I don't put the countries that support me in an awkward position by saying they're going to support me, because states have their own interests. These same states have interests in Djibouti just as they have interests in Kenya or in Madagascar. And so, I believe it is very important to observe the rules of decorum; it is a question of approach and strategy. It is true that many of the statements made are part of campaign propaganda. In elections, there is always campaign propaganda. But I remain confident. I believe that my profile is perfectly suited to the role of Commission President at this difficult time for the African Union. And I believe that the Heads of State's final choice will fall on the candidate whom they consider to be the ideal Commission President at this precise moment and in the circumstances we are currently facing, and which the African continent is going through.

Do you think this is one of the most unsettling moments of the last twenty years?

Yes, Africa today is going through very difficult times, particularly in terms of peace and security. Unconstitutional changes of government are on the rise. There are far more internal crises within countries than there were a decade ago. Inter-state problems are also on the rise. There are more and more crises of this kind. So I think the situation is a cause for concern for the continent's leaders. And it is very important that we recognise these difficulties today, and above all these challenges. And I can confirm that the continent is not in the best of shape

compared with previous decades. But it is not all doom and gloom. Nor should we succumb to Afro-pessimism. Positive steps are being taken. Progress is being made in other areas. But in terms of governance, peace and stability, there is certainly a regression.

Djibouti was defeated by Kenya in 2020 in the election for a non-permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council. Do you think this is now a rematch between the two countries? Are the Kenyans not employing the same strategy that brought them success previously? How do you intend to counter it?

Journalists can paint whatever picture they like. But what we in Djibouti know is that it is East Africa's turn. Djibouti, as an East African state, has the necessary expertise and, above all, the Djiboutians put forward are capable of shouldering this responsibility. And these are the main reasons that led the President of the Republic to put forward my candidacy for this post.

Could the Madagascan candidate pose a problem for your campaign by drawing votes away from the French-speaking countries? Does this prospect concern you? What is your plan in this regard? Recently, some people have speculated that the Madagascan candidate is being backed by the Kenyan candidate. Do you have any information to support this? Are you concerned about this new development?

Firstly, I am trying to present myself as a candidate who stands above this linguistic divide. I am able to express myself in both languages and, above all, to interact with all these communities in both English and French. But these two languages are not the only languages of communication within the African Union, as there are four others. So the language issue is certainly not a barrier for me. Secondly, I believe that Africa's Agenda 2063 sets out the objective of becoming an integrated continent. In order to talk about economic, trade and political integration, it is very important to move beyond this divide that colonisation has left us with. And I believe that this is the mindset we need to adopt.

You really stood out during the debate between the three candidates. Some even say you were a little too brilliant, to the point of frightening African heads of state and government, who do not necessarily want someone too clever for this post, as they might be uncontrollable. What do you make of that?

I wouldn't go that far. Perhaps we need to keep things in perspective. It was only a debate. And as for scaring African heads of state, I think that's a complete exaggeration. A complete exaggeration.

You've generally received good press, as they say, compared to the other candidates, including amongst Kenyans who are supporting you overwhelmingly on social media. How do you feel about this popularity? You seem to be very popular with Africans – is this also the case with the African heads of state and government who will ultimately be casting their votes? How do you plan to turn this popularity into votes on election day? You've been touring Africa over the last few months – how many countries have you visited?

Around thirty. I've visited about twenty myself, and together with our envoys we've covered at least 37 countries.

And how do you and your envoys feel about that?

Whenever I meet heads of state – at least in my own experience – I get the impression that they understand the messages I convey and, above all, that they appreciate the way I explain

my vision for the continent. In my view, I am the sort of person they were hoping for at the helm of the Commission, and they have responded positively.

Let us turn to the governance of the African Union, which is plagued by a host of internal problems in many areas, notably the resources required to fulfil its mandate and its immense continent-wide objectives, which present a great many challenges. How do you intend to find swift and effective solutions, given the African Union's bureaucratic red tape?

The Commission needs to be reformed. We must continue to implement what are known as the 'golden rules'. These reforms have already been agreed by the Heads of State, but they need to be put into practice. For example, there is duplication of roles, and there are issues with promotion, recruitment and gender parity within the Commission: these challenges must be tackled as soon as I take office. Secondly, there are coordination issues: directorates and commissions operate in silos. We must be able to generate the momentum needed for these commissions and directorates to work together. It is very important to bring order to the Commission. And it is by having a strong, effective instrument that we can achieve the objectives for which the Commission was established. Secondly, there are issues regarding financial resources. The Commission manages the resources that Member States are willing to make available to it. And these contributions are not sufficient. We must be able to generate new resources, diversify our sources of revenue and press ahead with mobilising them in an ingenious manner.

Where will you find these new resources?

Take, for example, the African Union's 2025 budget. At the last summit in Accra, \$600 million was approved for the African Union's annual budget. \$200 million is raised by member states as statutory contributions. Five countries – Egypt, Morocco, South Africa, Nigeria and Algeria – pay roughly 40 per cent of the African Union's budget. Do you think that's fair? Each of them contributes 7.22 per cent of the budget. Half the burden of funding the African Union rests on these countries. This is a burden that we will need to consider sharing at some point. Furthermore, a reform was introduced in 2017 stipulating that statutory contributions must be based on a formula known as 0.2 per cent of eligible imports. Every country has imports, and this 0.2 per cent levy must be deducted from those imports and transferred to the African Union's accounts. Only 17 out of 55 countries are applying it, which means that if all 55 were to do so, we would cover all the African Union's needs and even more. So, first of all, there is a challenge in getting this reform accepted by the Member States, which voted for it themselves.

How do you explain this, then? Are these budgetary or financial issues...?

Certainly, countries have many priorities and many other considerations. But it is important that, gradually, Member States implement a reform that they themselves have endorsed, ratified and adopted. This sense of ownership is extremely important when it comes to financial resources. Of course, it is not just the Member States; we also want the private sector, patrons and mentors to contribute. After all, we do have African financial institutions such as African banks, and other partners – including bilateral ones – must be called upon. So it is not too much to ask of partners who have the capacity to help Africa develop its programmes.

Does the European Union provide 50 per cent of the African Union's funding?

It is not just the European Union. The African Union's development programmes are funded by partners. When we say 'partners', this includes the European Union, which is the main partner, but also the United States, China, Japan and many others. And so these partners provide nearly 50 to 60 per cent of the funding for the African Union's development programmes.

Do you think you will succeed where your predecessors seem to have failed at the helm of the institution, on a continent beset by numerous crises?

You know, in 2013 the African Union adopted what is known as the 50-year Agenda 2063. What do we want to achieve in 50 years' time? By 2063, we want to have an integrated, prosperous and peaceful Africa. To this end, the heads of state decided to put in place what are known as ten-year plans. There are five in total; the first has now expired, and we have been in the second ten-year plan for a year. The implementation rate for all these African Union programmes under the first ten-year plan did not exceed 37 per cent.

Was the plan too ambitious? How will you be able to persuade heads of state not to get bogged down in conflicts? How will you intervene? What is the 'Mahmoud' approach that will enable us to resolve the crisis between Rwanda and the DRC, the crisis in the Sahel, and the crisis in Sudan?

No, I would say rather that resources may have been lacking, the coordination mechanisms may not have worked, or perhaps the political commitment of Member States on certain issues has not been up to scratch. Now, how will the future President of the Commission go about significantly improving these implementation rates as part of a second ten-year plan? It is not the President of the Commission alone who possesses all the answers or a magic wand to move things forward. It is a collective effort, whether in the areas of peace, trade, education, the fight against pandemics, infrastructure, and so on. There are mechanisms and specialised institutions for each of these specific sectors, and so it is very important for the Commission to be able to coordinate action effectively and truly create synergies that will deliver what we call 'outputs' and 'results'. And that is where the main challenge for the new Commission will lie.

The question arises: 'This problem has persisted for decades, for example in the DRC. How do you intend to tackle it, as President of the Commission? There are heads of state who have not managed to do so.' My response is that I am not going to wave a magic wand or reinvent the wheel. But I believe we will continue to support the mediation efforts currently being led by the African Union under the guidance of President João Lourenço of Angola, who is Africa's champion of peace and the mediator in the crisis between Rwanda and the DRC. It is very important for the Commission to stand alongside President Lourenço. An extraordinary summit is scheduled for 7 February 2025 between the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and the East African Community (EAC) to try to resolve this issue between Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), particularly regarding the security crisis prevailing in the east of the DRC. It is not that the Commission is incapable of carrying out this coordination work, but these are chronic problems. The problem in the east of the DRC dates back more than thirty years, so for chronic problems, solutions take a long time to implement. It's very simple, really; I think we need to understand that.

On the issue of trade integration, there are what are known as non-tariff barriers at the borders between states. There is insufficient infrastructure between states to allow trade to develop properly. The African passport is not yet operational, meaning that people cannot travel from

one country to another without having to deal with administrative red tape, etc. Although the AfCFTA was established as early as 2019, tariff concessions remain in place; in other words, it is difficult for certain products to cross borders because some countries regard them as strategic goods and therefore believe they cannot be traded freely without barriers or duties. There are many challenges that cannot be resolved overnight. It takes time. But we must adopt the right methods and establish effective coordination to achieve results. My leadership will be based on this approach. What is important, however, is that we must continue to work – but work intelligently and in a concerted manner. Above all, we must not stop making efforts, because these are issues that cannot be resolved in 24 hours; after all, this is Africa, with its 55 countries, more than 1.5 billion inhabitants, 30 million square kilometres and a multitude of problems. We're not talking about a single country – and, besides, you can see the challenges faced by leaders in even a single country, given the difficulties our leaders have in resolving socio-economic, cultural and political problems, and so on. Imagine doing that across 55 countries, on the world's largest continent. It's not straightforward, but at the very least, what you need to realise is that there is still a vision, a way of doing things, an approach and methods which, in my view, can deliver the best results.

The AfCFTA is entering its sixth year of implementation. How many countries have ratified it? What approach or strategy do you intend to adopt, if elected, to persuade these countries to ratify it? The credibility of the agreement in the eyes of Africans and their partners is at stake, given that intra-African trade accounts for only around 3 per cent of the continent's total trade. The remainder of trade is with Europe, Arab countries and, primarily, Asia.

Virtually all countries have ratified it – 54 out of 55. To give you a figure, intra-African trade – which is really very low – stands at 18 per cent, whilst trade between African states and the rest of the world accounts for 80 per cent. To rectify this imbalance, we will need to significantly expand our infrastructure and transport corridors. The corridor linking Angola, Zambia and the DRC, and the one between South Africa and Zimbabwe, are fully operational. I could also mention the Djibouti–Ethiopia corridor, or the LAPSSET corridor, which will eventually link South Sudan, Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda and Rwanda.

We have examples of economic integration that are working and inspire confidence in a more open Africa. We must not take a pessimistic view of our continent. We must not underestimate the many successes that, unfortunately, go unnoticed; we must build on those initiatives that are working in the field of trade. In the field of infrastructure, one notable example is the major step forward represented by the continental 'open skies' agreement, which will liberalise and unify African airspace. More than 35 countries have ratified this treaty. It will be up to us to continue advocating for this, encouraging other states to ratify it without delay in order to strengthen interconnectivity and trade between African nations. There are rail corridors between Mali and Senegal, and between Djibouti and Addis Ababa...

We must continue to work on infrastructure because, ultimately, it is the foundation that enables states to develop and integrate with one another. This is why the African Union has made this issue a key priority, as part of a programme known as PIDA, or the Programme for Infrastructure Development in Africa. Its motto could be summarised as: interconnecting, integrating and transforming a continent. This is an inspiring message. We must strengthen this programme to enable it to gain momentum, which will require seeking to involve partners such as the African Development Bank (AfDB) or other financial institutions – raising their awareness and mobilising their support so that this grand ambition can be backed and sustained in a manner commensurate with the continent's socio-economic challenges.

Infrastructure costs a great deal of money, and funding is not always available; however, there are also pledges totalling 130 billion euros from the European Union, notably through the Global Gateway Africa initiative, which proposes to invest in the digital, energy and transport sectors, and to strengthen health, education and research systems. Funding can be secured to realise our ambitions, to accelerate our growth and to meet the needs of the continent's population. What is needed is the vision and the political will to put these plans into action.

Youth unemployment is a major crisis in Africa. What reforms do you propose to improve young people's access to employment and entrepreneurship? How do you explain the fact that young Africans are dying every day trying to cross the Mediterranean or the Bab el-Mandeb Strait? Why do our young people not believe in the future of our continent?

On 4 November, 600 young people from most countries across the continent gathered in Algiers for a Youth Forum and adopted a declaration. They clearly set out their demands in a 'Charter for African Youth'. This charter has not yet been fully ratified; we will press for member states to adopt it swiftly. Young people are calling to be included in all AfCFTA development programmes to support their projects, businesses and start-ups. Here too, the Commission will need to set about this task. The Commission's Chair, Moussa Faki Mahamat, has already taken the initiative and appointed youth ambassadors who regularly attend African Union meetings to represent young people's views and concerns. This was once again the case at a meeting of the Peace and Security Commission at ministerial level, which I chaired in December in Algiers. A young representative of the youth did not hesitate to take the floor to bring to our attention not only the difficulties faced by our young people but also their proposals for transforming Africa into a land of opportunity for its youth. This mechanism exists, and we should welcome it. All the more so as I have often found the comments made, the ideas discussed and the demands put forward to be highly relevant. I believe this generation is even more aware than we were at their age. We need to recognise this. The world is changing. We live in a society where young people are connected, where information is received in real time, and where young people cannot ignore what is happening in their country, on the continent and around the world. So we have a generation that is connected, up to date and brimming with ideas! I therefore believe we must listen to them and, where possible, put these ideas into practice.

Unemployment is now a global phenomenon; it exists all over the world. It is, to a greater or lesser extent, a result of a country's economic success. The stronger the economy, the lower the unemployment rate. Therefore, the focus must be on economic development; that is the first key factor. Secondly, the mobility of young people must be encouraged, whether for work, education, training or research. As you know, in Europe they have set up a programme called Erasmus to develop young people's skills and equip them to improve their employability; this also helps to encourage the sharing of innovative practices in the fields of education and training and, above all, to bring peoples and cultures closer together. Why not take inspiration from this? What greater ambition could there be than to promote inter-university exchanges, the acquisition of new knowledge, or to make access to the transfer of knowledge available to as many people as possible? We recently celebrated the 250th doctor trained in Djibouti. In the Chamber, during the ceremony, I was pleased to see that there were young Comorian students present who were enrolled at the engineering school and the medical school, and who had chosen our country for their studies. This sort of exchange must be expanded.

The third factor in helping to reduce this unemployment rate on the continent is the creation of funds to finance their projects and the businesses they set up. We need a youth fund dedicated to this cause. In addition to integrating them into the AfCFTA's development programmes, we must set up specialised institutions to enable them to access appropriate funding, following the example of what has been achieved with the Women's Trust Fund. We will be working actively on this.

As for this migration of young people by sea, it is an extremely risky venture. We must enable these young people to believe in the potential of their country and their continent. If people believe that El Dorado lies on the other side of the Mediterranean, no matter what measures are taken to dissuade them or to promote local development, their gaze will always be fixed elsewhere. I also believe that we could change the image of Africa – or at least the perception that our young people have of it – by showing them the opportunities that exist and the abundant resources beneath our soil... How can we give these young people hope? How can we open up new horizons for them? Within the Commission, this issue will be at the heart of our discussions. I am committed to this.

Wouldn't cinema be a good medium for promoting a positive image of Africa?

Africa's cultural affirmation on the world stage is a flagship programme. There are fifteen flagship programmes in Agenda 2063. In this regard, Africa possesses, for example, an intangible cultural heritage in terms of languages, a wealth of cultural sites and a wealth of artefacts. There are already programmes promoting these assets, some of which are well-established whilst others need to be better showcased. Take Afrobeat, for instance: the African Union supports this cultural movement, embodied by artists such as Burna Boy and Wizkid, amongst others. This entire music industry, which is exported across the globe, acts as an ambassador of sorts. More than 200 African languages have already been catalogued and are being taught. 50,000 teachers have been trained for this task, spread across 11 countries, with pilot projects to teach in African languages, so as to continue to keep them alive in the hearts of Africans and thus prevent these priceless treasures, bequeathed to us by our ancestors, from disappearing as a result of globalisation. \$300 million has been allocated to the digitisation of cultural sites across the African continent. Africa is a land of riches.

Yet the media ignore this other side of the continent; what comes across is only the armed violence, wars, coups, famines, droughts, pandemics and the suffering that have led to increased displacement.

This is what is known as 'streaming media' – a highly influential force globally – which, in the pursuit of ratings, prioritises scoops and the display of shocking, degrading images over depictions of African success stories. Africa is not the continent we are shown in the Western media. I travel extensively across the continent, and I can tell you that Africa is moving forward – indeed, it is making great strides. Look at Accra, Lagos, Addis Ababa and Cape Town: new cities are being built, just as in Egypt, where I was just two days ago, with the new capital Al-Masa, where billions of dollars have been invested. I could say the same of Dar es Salaam, which is undergoing remarkable changes. I believe that the image of Africa portrayed in the media is generally a distorted one.

This does not mean that Africa does not face major challenges, but we must recognise that we are lagging behind other continents in terms of peace and stability; that is a reality. In Latin America in the 1970s, there were coups d'état everywhere; today, that continent is at peace. We must not be afraid to speak the truth if we want to be heard. Our continent is facing enormous difficulties; as I said earlier, the previous decade was significantly better than the one we are currently experiencing. In a very short space of time, we have destroyed all the

gains made over the last decade. It is a huge waste and a considerable loss of time. The situation has been completely disrupted by anti-constitutional changes, wars, conflicts, and so on.

Could Trump's return make matters worse on the continent?

We have not yet heard from this administration any political vision for the United States regarding Africa or in relation to Africa. We shall judge by the evidence, as they say.

Still on the subject of the new Trump administration, could you tell us what the aid provided by USAID means for the continent and, above all, what impact the announced closure of this agency is likely to have on our continent in terms of job losses, health challenges and even humanitarian issues?

I can give you exact figures regarding the USAID programme in Djibouti. As for the rest of the continent, I must admit I do not yet know. Here, the total funding from the USAID programme over the past twenty years or so does not exceed 40 or 50 million dollars. The USAID office in Djibouti opened in 2005 and employs 195 people across four programmes – health, nutrition, education and employability – of whom barely twenty hold managerial positions. So it is not a matter of thousands of people being employed there. They have just been given three months' notice prior to their redundancy. As things stand, I note that we have not been officially informed by the US government that these programmes were to be discontinued.

Is this a lack of courtesy?

No, I don't think so. I believe they understand that this decision may not be final. But for Djibouti, it doesn't amount to much – it's important to realise that. It's not the hundreds of millions, or even billions, of dollars being paid out elsewhere.

Do you think that the food aid provided by USAID is holding back Africa's development?

Yes, I believe it is a problem – indeed, a problem with a capital 'P'. If aid is necessary, it amounts to saying that we have failed and that we have not managed to feed our own people. Secondly, it is not food aid that enables countries to develop. Food security cannot be made dependent on food donations received from abroad. This aid disrupts the national economy; it can only be a temporary solution to address a disaster, a climate-related catastrophe, an earthquake, floods... It is essential when governments are facing emergency situations that it can alleviate, but it cannot be a permanent solution. That is my position and that of our government. This cessation of food aid from USAID will ultimately help Africans to rise to the challenge and find African solutions to our food security challenges. In Djibouti, in the event of a natural disaster, we mobilise national solidarity; you saw this again recently during the Covid pandemic and the urban fires. It is important to realise that aid from Western countries is not altruistic; there are always expectations of compensation and quid pro quo. Recently, during the devastating weather events that struck Zambia and Tanzania, the first country to step in to support these two nations was South Africa. We ourselves, despite our limited resources, immediately sent medical equipment, medicines and some of our medical staff to Somalia following the terrible attacks there, to support the health services in Mogadishu, which were completely overwhelmed by the number of casualties. This mutual aid, this inter-African solidarity, does exist and is strong, but it is not publicised; it is not made visible.

In light of the major challenges Africa has faced during the Covid-19 pandemic, what concrete measures do you envisage to strengthen the continent's resilience and ensure effective preparedness for future pandemics?

On the issue of combating the pandemic and chronic diseases, Africa has a centre known by the acronym CDC, which stands for Centre for Disease Control. There are also agencies, including the African Medicines Agency (AMA), which is due to become operational shortly to ensure easy, controlled and affordable access to medicines for Africans.

The strategies developed at the continental level focus on expanding universal health cover, producing vaccines on the continent and combating pandemics such as Mpox, Ebola, HIV/AIDS and malaria.

My ambition is to fully realise these objectives, on which many specialised African institutions are already working. I will continue to support the CDC and create the conditions for better coordination between the CTS – the specialised technical committee on health, of which all African health ministers are members – the African Union Commission and the CDC.

It is no secret that elections in Africa are largely boycotted by opposition parties, which are often persecuted and hindered by the ruling powers. It appears that the authorities in AU member states frequently call upon the organisation's observers, whose final reports seem to systematically favour the outgoing governments and fail to mention the real problems encountered during the organisation of the elections. This gives Africans the impression that the AU acts as a supporter of the incumbent authorities in the countries that call upon it.

Do you have a strategy with concrete proposals for action that would reform the way the AU engages in these events, which are crucial to the Union's credibility?

The experts who carried out the review of the first ten-year plan in 2024 wrote in their report that the achievement rate for the indicator of good democratic governance (rule of law, justice, etc.) was the lowest of all. The targets were met by barely 17 per cent. In terms of democracy, political transition and elections, there has been regression in some countries and progress in others. It is difficult to generalise or to lump all countries together. There are changes in political leadership in an increasing number of African countries. There is no shortage of examples. I could mention Nigeria, Senegal or, most recently, Ghana. In these countries, the political opposition has taken power. But there have also been setbacks in others, such as coups d'état and unconstitutional changes: Niger, Mali, Burkina Faso, Gabon, Guinea, etc. So there are setbacks in some cases and progress in others. In South Africa, there is even a coalition government. We must therefore take a nuanced view: not all elections on the African continent are rigged or biased, and this is evident in the changes of government that have become almost the norm. Nevertheless, efforts must continue to ensure that the African Charter on Elections is truly applied across the entire continent. We must not give up and must continue to work with these states. Countries where unconstitutional changes have taken place have been immediately sanctioned by the African Union. They have been suspended from participating in continental bodies. In order for them to rejoin the community of nations, the African Union requires them to complete their transition processes and ensure that power is transferred to civilians through free and fair elections. These are processes that we are implementing with countries that have been subject to sanctions. However, not all countries are at the same level of economic development. The continent is diverse. The democratisation processes began some thirty years ago, around 1990, with the introduction of a multi-party system. And the states are making progress, each at their own pace. There is one point on which I would like to draw the attention of those who think that the European or

American model can be replicated everywhere. No, I do not believe that. Asia does not follow this model. That does not mean, however, that China is not a developed country. Take the examples of Mali, Burkina Faso or Niger, where democratic transitions of power had taken place. This did not prevent these elected regimes from being swept away by military coups. We must therefore put into perspective the political analysis we apply to African states when it comes to elections and democratic transitions of power. Moreover, as Winston Churchill said, the establishment of a Western-style democracy is merely ‘a bad system, but it is the least bad of all systems’. So it is not the best!

So do we need strong leaders and weak institutions?

No, on the contrary, the two go hand in hand. A mismatch between them is not a good thing. The defining characteristics of states are their cultural specificities, their history and their complexities. All states share the same aspirations, but to achieve them, they do not all have the same institutions, nor the same internal circumstances. In my view, a strong leader always relies on strong institutions; otherwise, they become weakened. Creating strong institutions also lays the foundations for a democracy or a political system in which popular participation is genuinely effective, rather than merely a facade. A country with strong institutions is also a guarantee of lasting peace and stability. A country with strong institutions sows the seeds for its future development, and I am among those calling for African states to consolidate both their national and continental institutions.

Why is East Africa the most troubled region on the continent?

I believe that East Africa has experienced numerous wars in its modern history. When there are painful conflicts in a region, the aftershocks – much like those of an earthquake – have disastrous consequences. Over time, the grievances on both sides become increasingly irreconcilable. There have been three wars between Ethiopia and Somalia, two of which took place in recent decades. There have been 40 years of war between South Sudan and Sudan. Ethiopia has experienced alternating periods of internal upheaval for virtually the entire past fifty years. Somalia, following the war with Ethiopia in 1977, has failed to recover. These states remain destabilised by the consequences of these conflicts, which have, in particular, weakened their institutions. It takes time to get back on a sound footing. This is why the Horn of Africa lags behind other regions of the continent, owing to its turbulent history spanning several decades – a history marked by internal conflicts. This commentary is an initial analysis. The second point that springs to mind is that this is an extremely strategic region, one of great importance because it lies at the crossroads of continents, and so instability is sometimes fuelled from outside. This is not a factor that should be overlooked. If today there are so many al-Shabaab fighters, foreign fighters, or even such a proliferation of weapons in Somalia, I believe this can be explained in part by a form of interference by hostile forces, maintained and supported from outside to carry out an agenda that has been dictated to them. We see a similar pattern in Sudan. This vast country is, in a sense, the heart of Africa. Consider Sudan’s geographical position: it shares borders with at least seven or eight neighbouring countries. It is an extremely strategic country, and there are many who covet control over it, not to mention the mineral resources it possesses. The same applies to the countries of the Horn of Africa. We are situated on the busiest shipping route. All the world’s major powers want to have a say in what happens here. So, external interference is never far away; we must not ignore this. The Horn of Africa carries precisely this historical weight, this geostrategic asset that invites and encourages such external interference. And finally, and very importantly, this region has always been at the forefront of the continent’s liberation

movements. I am thinking of all those thinkers, those great figures of 20th-century history, who shaped Pan-Africanism. Many came from here: Julius Nyerere of Tanzania, Haile Selassie of Ethiopia, Jomo Kenyatta of Kenya, Hassan Gouled Aptidon of Djibouti. It was not just Kwame Nkrumah in the West, or Gamal Abdel Nasser in the North. All these leaders I have mentioned – my list is by no means exhaustive; I am, of course, bound to have left some out – spearheaded liberation movements and played a vital role in shaping the continent's destiny; we must be proud of them. Taken together, these factors mean that the Horn of Africa remains a region under close scrutiny.

A veritable war of interference – involving the US, the UAE, Europe, China and Russia – is unfolding before our very eyes, exacerbating tensions and crises across the continent. How can we break free from this?

We live in a globalised world; global security is a collective endeavour. International trade is also globalised, so we cannot afford to adopt a protectionist or isolationist stance. We must not delude ourselves. We must not think that we can go it alone and that we do not want to hear from others. But we must organise these international relations in such a way that they are balanced, based on useful partnerships – win-win, as the Chinese say. If we manage to put in place agreements, contracts, treaties and conventions that govern these relations in a spirit of fairness and solidarity, we cannot end up in situations of domination, interference, and so on. The African Union itself has partnerships with the United Nations and the European Union, as well as bilateral ties with South Korea, Japan and China.

Why does the African Union not condemn or highlight these instances of interference, even when they are clearly documented in United Nations reports – I am thinking, for example, of Sudan or the current crisis in the Great Lakes region?

I shall return to the subject of Sudan, but first I would like to give you an example from the Great Lakes region: certain countries accuse Rwanda of being active in the east of the DRC. If the African Union were to settle the issue definitively in favour of one side or the other, its role as a mediator would no longer be possible. Take the crisis between Israel and Palestine. How can the United States of America claim to act as a mediator to resolve this territorial dispute, which has been going on for over seventy years, and establish the conditions for peaceful coexistence between these two peoples? How can they be so presumptuous? They have already taken sides! They are supplying weapons and bombs to reduce all existing homes and infrastructure to rubble, rendering the area uninhabitable for decades; civilians, targeted with impunity, are being massacred in their tens of thousands; and as if that were not enough, they are proclaiming that they intend to displace two million people from Gaza and resettle them somewhere other than on their own land.

The African Union wishes to avoid such pitfalls and bias, and to maintain dialogue in order to bring the warring parties to their senses. It is not the United Nations, the European Union or the United States that will dictate what must be done to restore peace and silence the guns. In order to make an accurate assessment and strive to resolve African problems through African solutions, Africa, the Commission, the specialised agencies and the associated mechanisms must work with the states in conflict to bring them closer together. For this reason, we have appointed ‘champions for peace’, such as João Lourenço, President of Angola, who has been tasked with rebuilding trust and ties between these two countries in conflict. Imagine if the meeting on 7 February, which is due to bring the two parties together, were to conclude that the African Union should take a public stance on the situation in the Great Lakes region. I’m not sure that this will get things moving or help resolve these chronic problems. Some

disagree and argue that the African Union should take a firm stance. But has that worked elsewhere? Has this approach been constructive in the case of Ukraine? Have resolutions, international condemnations and economic sanctions helped to restore peace in Ukraine? We need to think differently – as the English say, ‘outside the box’ – take a step back, look at the bigger picture and think outside the box if we want to make progress. Our European friends are stuck in the stance they have adopted. But where is the solution? We must return to the negotiating table, never let the thread of conversation break, continue the dialogue, and propose some form of negotiation or settlement; and to do this, it is essential that the mediating party maintains the necessary detachment to try to find possible points of agreement.

The issue of interference is a very sensitive one: how do you explain the fact that the European Union has managed to force YouTube to stop distributing the Russia Today (RT) and Sputnik channels on our continent? Isn't claiming to make decisions on our behalf to protect us from the influence of Russian propaganda tantamount to treating Africans like children? Paradoxically, Russia Today (RT) and Sputnik are still accessible on YouTube in the United States.

Are you sure about that? I've seen many countries in Africa where RT and Sputnik are accessible. It's not a blanket ban. Perhaps some European satellite packages have removed Russian media from their line-up. As for YouTube, I'm not sure – I'll look into it – but what I do know is that if you have a DSTv package, which is available pretty much everywhere in Africa, these channels are included. Finally, it's also worth noting that YouTube no longer has the global dominance it once did. It's being overtaken by TikTok and others; the competition is wide open.

Given this double standard, shouldn't Africans withdraw from the International Criminal Court (ICC)?

What is meant by international law? International law was established with its own mechanisms and judicial institutions, such as the International Court of Justice and the International Criminal Court, amongst others. They were set up to preserve peace after the Second World War, like many other institutions based on the same model that operate at regional or even continental level, with the aim of fostering a climate of peace throughout the world. And, where necessary, to try crimes against humanity, war crimes, genocide, ethnic cleansing... The crime of genocide in Rwanda has been conclusively established by these international judicial institutions. If these institutions cease to function, it is international justice that will suffer, and this will create instability across the world. One cannot fail to understand this. These international institutions were created to preserve peace. If we start to trample on them and discredit them, or even punish ICC judges because they have issued an arrest warrant for X or Y, we are putting world peace at risk. This is a reality that cannot be taken lightly. Secondly, I must point out that for a long time the ICC was seen as a court for African political leaders; I believe that is no longer the case. Leaders of small but influential countries, as well as those of large countries, are also being prosecuted for crimes of which they are alleged to be guilty; others have even been arrested – I am thinking in particular of Slobodan Milošević. The key point to remember is that the ICC is an important international institution for world peace. It is necessary; it must be strengthened; and its judicial decisions must not be tainted by political considerations – that is what matters. Some countries are not signatories to this treaty, but that does not limit the work of the institution, and particularly

that of its judges, who investigate crimes. It does not matter whether your country is a member or not; those presumed guilty will be prosecuted and judged for their actions. This institution is fulfilling its role, and it must continue to do so.

In an increasingly fragmented world, clashes over sovereignty are taking place in a changing environment, where the rules of international law are rarely invoked in negotiations or strategies to exert influence; is the commitment to non-alignment held by most African countries not being put to the test? How can Africa take control of its own destiny? What future do you envisage for Africa within this new, fragmented geopolitical and geo-economic landscape? How can we strengthen Africa's defences in the face of mounting threats and rival ambitions?

I have a position on this issue as a candidate for the presidency of the African Commission. Africa's place is within the Global South. You see, we are in a world that is becoming increasingly polarised, and this polarisation has names: BRICS, NATO, the European Union, the Indo-Pacific, and so on. I believe that the Global South must organise itself and defend its interests, just as other entities that place themselves on an equal footing do. For the time being, Africa cannot position itself alone in relation to these major groups of influence in the world. We talk about the Indo-Pacific; this is a form of polarisation. The Indo-Pacific consists of Western nations and a number of Asian countries, united to counter Chinese influence. NATO is about defending Europe and the United States should any of the countries within that alliance come under attack. And in all these alliances, where does Africa fit in? We do not have all the capabilities needed to stand on our own in this multipolar world. Until we are able to stand on our own two feet and face these new dangers that lie in wait for us, let us take our rightful place alongside the Global South, alongside the BRICS nations. That is the position I will champion if I am elected.

A stance reminiscent of the Bandung Line?

The Non-Aligned Movement, founded in Bandung, Indonesia, in 1955, has its roots in the irreconcilable antagonisms between the two blocs of the time, the West and the East. At that time, there were two blocs: the Warsaw Pact and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO). It was against this backdrop that the Non-Aligned Movement came into being and asserted its right not to belong to any military coalition. Since its creation seventy years ago, the world has evolved and is undergoing change. We must adapt to these new balances, and I believe that the new pole is that of the BRICS, within which the countries of the Global South, imbued with the spirit and philosophy championed by the Bandung Declaration, can come together. The trend is for the BRICS to expand, and Africa will play its full part in this.

*Interview by **Mahdi A.**, photos **Hani Kihary***

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