

“Africa’s place is in the global South”, says 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 of Foreign Affairs since 2005 and a key figure in continental diplomacy, embodies a bold ambition for Africa. Buoyed by unprecedented popular mobilisation, this multilingual Djiboutian candidate defends an inclusive vision: peace, economic sovereignty and youth at the heart of the continental agenda. In this exclusive interview with Human Village, he looks back at the challenges facing his campaign, unveils his strategy for rallying reluctant states, and provides straightforward answers to thorny questions, from foreign interference to the credibility of African elections, not forgetting the critical issue of the Continental Free Trade Area. What levers does he use to convince African heads of state? And above all, how can he embody the hope of a united Africa in a fragmented world? Elements of an answer from a man who, behind a diplomatic phlegm, displays a determination to “silence weapons and ignite opportunities”.

***Human Village* : Were you moved by the massive mobilisation of the Djiboutian population on February 1 in support of your candidacy for the AU?**

Mahmoud Ali Youssouf: I was very touched. I was abroad campaigning at the time of this event. I was in Senegal to meet President Bassirou Diomaye Diakhar Faye, and then I went to Egypt to present my candidacy and my ambitions for the continent to President Abdel Fattah Al-Sissi. So I was following these popular mobilisations from afar. I believe that our people are committed to this candidacy as a national cause. That’s how I see it. This passion, this enthusiasm, all mobilised to support my candidacy. I think it’s patriotism expressed through this popular support. I was very moved by it, and I even sent a message of thanks to the participants in both Afar and Somali. It really warmed my heart, and I thanked them and continue to thank them.

On several occasions, Djiboutians have been unsuccessful candidates for top positions in multilateral organizations. What did they lack to succeed, in your opinion? And how are you going to make the difference now that you’re a candidate yourself? Was it a more or less resounding failure?

I wouldn’t use that word, but I think we learn from these failures first. And you have to bear in mind that these are posts for which representatives from 55 countries are competing. So, it’s not easy. In other words, since the competition is very tough, that’s one factor. The other factor that may have thwarted a certain number of our ambitions is the fact that we may not have taken the time to convince and, above all, prepare our candidates for a competition which, I would remind you, is extremely tough, first and foremost in terms of the quality of the candidates presented, their profiles and their experience. And I think it’s a question of preparation. You have to prepare in advance, you have to convince people, you have to run a grassroots campaign, you have to visit the country in its capital and you have to put in the resources, because this type of election is not won by speeches and slogans alone. You need resources, etc. That’s perhaps what we’ve been lacking. You need meetings, you need TV appearances, you need interviews, you need press conferences. And all that costs money. You have to have all these levers and plan all these activities.

Does demographic and/or geographical weight also play a role? Djibouti's small size compared to Nigeria, for example?

Let's just say that countries have influences. And this influence is not only linked to size. There are very small countries that are very influential, and large countries that are not. Size is not necessarily a determining factor in this kind of analysis. But what you do need to know is that your country's role on the continent's major issues - peace, stability, the fight against terrorism, conflict resolution - all these questions are weighed in the balance when the choice of a candidate from a given country is made by the Head of State. So we can't limit ourselves to just one or two considerations. There are many elements that enter into the equation when it comes to competing for such an important position at continental level.

Many Djiboutians are wondering what your election could bring to the Republic of Djibouti? What's your answer?

Why do Djiboutians feel so involved in this election as if they were part of it? First of all, because I'm a Djiboutian. It's a natural and quick response. When a Djiboutian is in a competition, Djiboutians show solidarity. It's an automatic reaction, I'd say, and we shouldn't be surprised. Secondly, it also shows that people in our country are united. It's a sign of solidarity, you have to know that. They need to get together on the big occasions, for the big causes. People are there, they're patriotic, they're united. And finally, I think I've been around the political and diplomatic scene for a few decades, and I think Djiboutians know me.

The Kenyan candidate boasts the support of several African countries for his candidacy? For example, Algeria, as President Ruto tweeted, or Uganda, as President Museveni says, or Rwanda, Tanzania or South Sudan, as the press repeats. How do you feel about the support he claims to have? Do you also have declared support? What support? Which countries are you counting on the most?

It's a question of strategy. Personally, I don't embarrass the countries that support me by saying that they're going to support me because the States have interests. These same States have interests with Djibouti, just as they have interests with Kenya or Madagascar. So it's very important, it's a question of approach and strategy. It's true that many of the statements made are campaign propaganda. In elections, there's always campaign propaganda. But I remain confident. I believe that my profile is exactly right for the post of Chairman of the Commission at this difficult time for the African Union. And I believe that the final choice of the Heads of State will go to the candidate they feel represents the ideal Commission Chairman at this moment in time and in the circumstances we are experiencing and that the African continent is going through.

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

Yes, when it comes to peace and security, Africa is going through some very difficult times. Unconstitutional changes are proliferating. Internal crises are far more numerous than a decade ago. Interstate problems are also on the increase. There are more and more of these kinds of crises. So I think the situation is a source of concern for the continent's leaders. And it's very important that today we become aware of these difficulties and above all of these challenges. And I can confirm that the continent is not at its best compared to previous decades. But it's not all doom and gloom. Nor should we fall into the trap of Afro-pessimism. Positive things are being done. Progress is being made in other areas. But in terms of governance, peace and stability, there has certainly been 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? Aren't the Kenyans deploying the same strategy that made them so successful in the past? How are you going to counter it?

Journalists can set any scene they like. But what we know in Djibouti is that it's East Africa's turn. Djibouti, as an East African state, has the necessary skills and, above all, the Djiboutians presented are capable of taking on this responsibility. These are the main reasons why the President of the Republic decided to nominate me for this position.

Could the Malagasy candidate pose a problem for your candidacy by capturing a share of the votes from French-speaking countries? Does this prospect worry you? What are your plans in this respect? Lately, some people have been speculating that the Malagasy candidate is being encouraged by the Kenyan candidate. Do you have any information on this? Are you worried about this new situation?

First of all, I'm trying to present myself as a candidate who's above this linguistic divide. I'm capable of expressing myself in both languages, and above all of interacting with all these communities in both English and French. But these two languages are not the only languages of communication at the African Union, as there are four others. So language is certainly not a barrier for me. Secondly, I believe that Africa has, in Agenda 2063, the objective of being an integrated continent. To be able to talk about economic, commercial and political integration, it's very important to overcome the divide that colonisation bequeathed us. And I believe that this is the mindset we need to adopt.

You stood out during the debate between the three candidates. Some even said you were a little too brilliant, to the point of scaring off African heads of state and government, who don't necessarily want a head too well made for the job, as it could get out of hand. What do you have to say about that?

I have no such pretentiousness. Perhaps we need to keep things in proportion. It was just a debate. And to scare African heads of state, I think that's completely exaggerated. But completely.

You've got good press overall, as they say, compared with the other candidates, including among Kenyans who support you massively on social networks. How do you feel about this popularity? Africans seem to like you a lot, but is this also the case with the African heads of state and government who will *ultimately be* voting? How do you turn this popularity into votes? How many countries have you visited in recent months?

Around thirty. Twenty myself, and with the emissaries we've visited at least 37 countries.

And how do you and your emissaries feel about that?

Every time I meet the heads of state, at least in my direct experience, I get the impression that they understand the messages I'm conveying, and above all, they appreciate the way I explain the vision I have for the continent. In my opinion, my profile is what they expected at the head of the Commission, and they have reacted positively.

Let's move on to the internal governance of the African Union, which suffers from a large number of internal problems in many areas, including the resources needed to carry out its mandate and its immense objectives on a continental scale, which represent a large number of challenges. How do you intend to find quick and useful solutions to the African Union's administrative red tape?

We need to reform the Commission. 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 implemented. For example, there is duplication, there is a problem of promotion, recruitment, parity at Commission level: these challenges must be tackled from the outset. Then there are coordination issues: the departments and commissions work in silos. We need to be able to create the energy for these commissions and departments to work together. It's very important to bring order to the Commission. And it's by having a strong, effective instrument that we can implement the objectives for which the Commission was set up. Secondly, there are problems of financial resources. The Commission manages the resources that the Member States are willing to make available to it. And these resources are not sufficient. We need to be able to generate new resources, diversify our sources of revenue and move forward in mobilising these resources.

Where will you find these new resources?

Let me give you an example: the African Union's 2025 budget. 600 million dollars were voted in Accra at the last summit for the African Union's annual budget. 200 million dollars are raised by member states as a statutory contribution. Five countries - Egypt, Morocco, South Africa, Nigeria and Algeria - pay around 40% of the African Union's budget. Do you think this is normal? Each of them pays 7.22% of the budget. Half the burden of financing the African Union falls on these countries. It's a burden that we'll have to think about sharing at some point. Then there's a reform that was put in place from 2017 that says statutory contributions must be based on a formula called the 0.2% of eligible imports. Each country has imports and this 0.2% tax must be levied on these imports and transferred to the African Union's accounts. Only 17 countries out of 55 apply it, which means that if we were to reach 55, we would cover all the African Union's needs, or even more. So, already, there's a concern to get this reform accepted by the member states who voted for it themselves.

So how do you explain this? Are they budgetary or financial problems?

Certainly, countries have many priorities and many other considerations. But it's important that member states progressively implement a reform that they themselves have endorsed, ratified and adopted. In terms of financial resources, ownership is extremely important. Of course, it's not just the member states that need to contribute, but also the private sector, patrons and mentors. We do have African financial institutions such as the African banks, and other partners, even bilateral ones, need to be solicited. So it's not asking too much of partners who have the capacity to help Africa develop its programs.

Does the European Union fund 50% of the African Union?

Not just the European Union. The African Union's development programs are financed by its partners. When we say partner, we mean the European Union, which is the main partner, but also the United States, China, Japan and many others. These partners provide almost 50-60% of the funding for the African Union's development programs.

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

You know, in 2013, the African Union adopted what is known as Agenda 2063, a 50-year plan. What do we want at the end of 50 years? In 2063, we want an integrated, prosperous and peaceful Africa. To achieve this, the Heads of State have decided to set up what are known as ten-year plans. There are five in all, the first of which has expired, and we've been in the second ten-year plan for a year now. The implementation rate of all these African Union programs in the first ten-year plan did not exceed 37%.

Was the plan too ambitious? How are you going to convince the Heads of State not to weld themselves together in conflict? How are you going to intervene? What is the “Mahamoud” touch that will enable us to resolve the crisis in Rwanda with the DRC, the crisis in the Sahel, the crisis in Sudan?

No, I'd rather say that resources may have been lacking, coordination mechanisms may not have worked, or perhaps the political commitment of member states to certain issues may not have been up to scratch. Now, what will the future President of the Commission do to significantly improve these implementation rates within the framework of a second ten-year plan? It's not the President of the Commission alone who has the infallible science or a magic wand to be able to move forward. It's a collective effort, whether in terms of peace, trade, education, the fight against pandemics, infrastructure, etc. There are mechanisms and institutions in place to achieve this. There are specialised mechanisms and institutions for each of these specific sectors, and so it's very important for the Commission to be able to coordinate action effectively and really introduce a synergy that enables us to have what we call deliverables, results. And that's where the main challenge for the new Commission lies.

The question arises: “ *The problem has persisted for decades in the DRC, for example. What are you going to do, Mr. Chairman of the Commission? Some heads of state just can't manage it.* My answer is that I'm not going to wave a magic wand or reinvent the wheel. But I do believe that we will continue to support the mediation and efforts being made by the African Union under the leadership of President João Lourenço of Angola, who is Africa's champion of peace and mediator in the crisis between Rwanda and the DRC. It's very important for the Commission to be present alongside President Lourenço. There is an extraordinary summit scheduled for February 7, 2025 between the Southern African Development Community (SADEC) and the *East African Community* (EAC) to try to resolve the problem between Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), in particular the security crisis in eastern DRC. It's not that the Commission is incapable of doing this coordination work, but these are chronic problems. The problem in the east of the DRC goes back more than thirty years, so for chronic problems, the treatments are long term. I think it's very simple to understand.

On the question of trade integration, there are what we call non-tariff barriers at the borders between states. There isn't enough infrastructure between states for trade to develop properly. The African passport is not yet operational, so that people can move from one country to another without having to go through red tape and so on. Although ZLECAF has already been set up in 2019, tariff concessions are still in place, meaning that it's difficult for certain products to cross from one border to another because some countries consider that these are strategic products and therefore cannot be traded freely without hindrance or tax. There are a lot of challenges that can't be solved in the blink of an eye. They take time. But you have to use the right methods and create the right coordination to get results. *My leadership* will be based on this approach. But the important thing is to keep working. But work in an intelligent and concerted way. And above all, we must not stop our efforts, because these are issues that cannot be resolved in 24 hours, because this is Africa, with its 55 countries, 30 million square kilometres and a multitude of problems. We're not talking about one country, and besides, you see *leadership* in a single country with all the difficulties our leaders have in resolving socio-economic, cultural, political and other problems. Imagine yourself in 55 countries, the world's largest continent. It's not easy, but at least what you need to know is that there is a vision, a way of doing things, an approach and methods that, in my opinion, will produce the best results.

ZLECAF is entering its sixth year of implementation. How many countries have ratified it? What method/strategy do you intend to deploy if elected to convince these countries to ratify it? It's a question of the agreement's credibility with Africans and partners alike, given that inter-African trade represents only around 3% of the continent's total trade. The remainder is traded with Europe, Arab countries and, above all, Asia.

Virtually all countries have ratified it, 54 out of 55. Intra-African trade, to give you a figure - we're really very low - stands at 18%, whereas trade between African states and the rest of the world is 80%. To correct this anomaly, we need to increase the number of infrastructures and corridors. The corridor between Angola, Zambia and the DRC, or the one between South Africa and Zimbabwe, are highly operational. I could also mention the Djibouti-Ethiopia corridor, or the LAPSET corridor that will eventually link South Sudan-Ethiopia-Kenya-Uganda-Rwanda.

We have examples of economic interpenetration that work, giving us confidence in a more open Africa. We shouldn't have a pessimistic image of our continent. We mustn't underestimate the many successes that unfortunately go unnoticed, and build on those that work in business. In terms of infrastructure, the continental *open skies* initiative is a major step forward in liberalising and unifying African airspace. Over 35 countries have ratified this treaty. It's up to us to keep up the pressure and encourage other countries to do the same soon, in order to strengthen interconnections and exchanges between African nations. There are rail corridors between Mali and Senegal, between Djibouti and Addis Ababa...

We need to continue working on infrastructure, because in the final analysis, it's the foundation on which states can develop and integrate with one another. That's why the African Union has made infrastructure one of its priorities, in a program whose acronym is PIDA or Program for Infrastructure Development in Africa. Its motto could be summed up as: interconnect, integrate and transform a continent. This is an inspiring message. We need to strengthen this program to speed it up, which will mean bringing on board partners such as the African Development Bank (AfDB) and other financial institutions that we need to raise awareness and mobilise, so that this great ambition can be accompanied and supported in line with the continent's socio-economic challenges. Infrastructure costs a lot of money, and funding isn't always available, but there are also promises to the tune of 130 billion euros from the European Union, notably through the *Global Gateway Africa* program, which proposes to invest in the digital, energy and transport sectors, and to strengthen health, education and research systems. Financing can be obtained for the ambitions we have, to accelerate our growth and meet the needs of the continent's population. We just need the vision and political will to implement it.

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 to cross the Mediterranean or the Bad-el-Mandeb? Why don't our young people believe in the future of our continent?

On November 4, 600 young people from most of the continent met in Algiers for a Youth Forum and adopted a declaration. They clearly expressed their demands in a "*Charter for African Youth*". This charter has not yet been fully ratified, but we're going to push for its rapid adoption by member states. Young people are asking to be included in all FTAA development programs, to support their projects, businesses and *start-ups*. Here too, the commission will have to tackle this task. Commission Chairman Moussa Faki Mahamat has already taken the lead, appointing youth ambassadors who regularly attend African Union meetings to convey the voice of young people and their demands. This was again the case at a meeting of the Peace and Security Commission at ministerial level that I chaired in Algiers in December. A young youth representative did not hesitate to take the floor to tell us about the

difficulties faced by our young people, but also about their proposals for transforming Africa into a land of opportunity for its youth. The mechanism exists, and we're delighted about it. And all the more so as I have often found the remarks made, the ideas discussed and the demands made to be very pertinent. I think this generation is even more awake than ours at their age. You have to realise that. 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 can't ignore what's going on in their country, on the continent and in the world. So young people are connected, up to date and full of ideas to spare! So I think we need to listen to them and, wherever possible, implement these ideas.

Now, unemployment is a global phenomenon, it exists everywhere in the world. It's more or less the result of a country's economic success. The more successful the economy, the less unemployment. That's why the first step is to focus on economic development. Next, we need to encourage the mobility of young people, whether for work or for education, training or research. As you know, in Europe, they have set up a program called Erasmus to develop the skills of young people and equip them for greater employability, which also makes it possible 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 draw inspiration from it? What better ambition than to encourage inter-university exchanges, the acquisition of new knowledge or to democratise access to knowledge transfer for as many people as possible? We recently celebrated the 250th doctor trained in Djibouti. At the ceremony in the Chamber, I was delighted to see young Comorian students from the engineering school and medical university who had chosen our country for their training. This type of exchange must be multiplied.

The third way to help reduce unemployment on the continent is to create funds to finance their projects and businesses. We need a youth fund dedicated to this cause. In addition to integrating them into FTAA development programs, we need to prepare specialised institutions to enable them to access appropriate financing, along the lines of what has been achieved for the Women's Trust Fund. We'll be working actively on this.

As for the migration of young people by sea, it's an extremely risky venture. We need to enable these young people to believe in the potential of their country and their continent. If people think that El Dorado lies on the other side of the Mediterranean, no matter how much we try to dissuade them or develop them locally, they will always look elsewhere. I also believe that we could reverse the image of Africa, or at least the perception that our young people have of it, and reveal to them the opportunities that exist, the abundant resources of our sub-soil... How can we give hope to these young people, how can we open up new horizons for them? I'm committed to it.

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

The affirmation of Africa on a cultural level throughout the world is a flagship program. There are fifteen flagship programs in the 20/63 agenda. In this respect, Africa has an intangible cultural treasure trove of languages, cultural sites and artifacts. There are already programs in place to promote this, some of which are highly developed, while others need to be developed further. Take Afrobeat: the African Union supports this cultural movement, embodied by Burna Boy, Wizkid and others. This whole music industry, exported around the world, is in a way an ambassador. Over 200 African languages are already listed and taught. 50,000 teachers have been trained for this mission, spread across 11 countries with pilot projects to teach African languages, to keep them shining in the hearts of Africans and prevent these priceless riches bequeathed to us by our forefathers from disappearing as a result of globalisation. 300 million dollars have been spent on digitising cultural sites on the African continent. Africa has wealth.

Yet the media ignore this other facet of the continent, highlighting only armed violence, wars, coups d'état, famines, droughts, pandemics and the suffering that has led to increased displacement.

This is what is known as *streaming* media, the most important media in the world, which prefers to show shocking images for ratings and scoops, rather than those of African success stories. Africa is not what we see in the Western media. I travel a lot around the continent, and I can tell you that Africa is moving forward, even making great strides. Look at Accra, Lagos, Addis Ababa, Cape Town, new cities are being built, 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 for Dar-el-Salaam, which is undergoing remarkable upheaval. I believe that the image given of Africa in the media is generally a truncated one.

That's not to say that Africa doesn't face major challenges, but it's a fact that we lag behind other continents in terms of peace and stability. In Latin America in the 1970s, there were coups d'état all over the place, but today this continent is pacified. We must not be afraid to speak the truth, if we want to be heard. As I said earlier, the previous decade was much better than the current one. In a very short space of time, we have destroyed all the gains of the last decade. An enormous waste of time and money. The world is now in a state of upheaval, due to anti-constitutional changes, wars, conflicts and so on.

Will Trump's return help matters on the continent?

We have yet to hear from this administration a political vision of the United States for Africa or in relation to Africa. We'll have to judge on the evidence, as they say.

Still on the subject of the new Trump administration, could you tell us what the aid paid out by Usaid represents for the continent, and especially what impact in terms of jobs destroyed, health challenges, and even humanitarian challenges the announced end of this agency is likely to pose for our continent?

I can give you exact figures for the Usaid program in Djibouti. For the rest of the continent, I confess I don't yet know. Here, the cumulative Usaid program over some twenty years doesn't exceed 40 or 50 million dollars. The Usaid office in Djibouti opened in 2005, and employs 195 people in four programs - health, nutrition, education and employability - of whom barely twenty hold managerial positions. So it's not thousands of people on the payroll. They have just been given three months' notice of their dismissal. For the time being, I note that we have not been officially notified by the US government that these programs are to cease.

Is this a lack of courtesy?

No, I don't think it is. I think they understand that this decision may not be final. But for Djibouti, it doesn't mean much, you have to realise that. It's not the hundreds of millions, or even billions of dollars paid out elsewhere.

Do you think that Usaid food aid is a brake on Africa's development?

Yes, I think it's a problem, even a problem with a capital "P". If aid is necessary, it's tantamount to saying that we've failed to feed our population. Secondly, it's not food aid that enables countries to develop. Food security cannot depend on food donations from abroad. This aid disrupts the national economy, and can only be a temporary solution in response to a calamity, a climatic disaster, an earthquake, floods... It is indispensable when governments are faced with emergency situations, which it can alleviate, but it cannot be permanent. This is my position and that of our government. This halt to Usaid food aid will *ultimately* help

Africans to rise above themselves and find African solutions to our food security challenges. In Djibouti, in the event of a natural disaster, we mobilise national solidarity, as you saw again recently with Covid and the urban fires. It's important to realise that aid from Western countries is not altruistic; there are always expected compensations, *quid pro quos*. We need to be aware of this. Recently, during the appalling weather phenomena 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 dispatched medical equipment, medicines and some of our medical staff to support the Mogadishu health services, which were completely overwhelmed by the number of wounded. This mutual aid, this inter-African solidarity exists, it is strong, except that it is not publicised, it is not made visible.

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

On the question of pandemic and chronic disease control, Africa has a centre known by the acronym CDC, which stands for Center for Disease Control. There are also a number of agencies, including the African Medicines Agency (AMA), which is due to go into operation shortly to provide Africans with easy, controlled and inexpensive access to medicines.

The strategies developed at continental level revolve around extending universal medical coverage, producing vaccines on the continent and combating pandemics such as Mpox, Ebola, 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's no secret that elections in Africa are largely boycotted by the opposition, often pursued and prevented by the powers that be. It seems that the authorities of AU member countries often call on the organisation's observers, whose final reports seem systematically to favour outgoing governments and make no mention of the real problems encountered during the organisation of electoral consultations. This gives Africans the impression that the AU is supporting the authorities in place in the countries that call on its services.

Do you have any strong proposals for action to reform the AU's involvement in these events, which are crucial to the Union's credibility?

The experts who took stock of the first ten-year plan in 2024 wrote in their report that the rate of achievement of the good democratic governance indicator (rule of law, justice, etc.) was the lowest of all. Only 17% of objectives were achieved. When it comes to democracy, political alternation and elections, some countries have regressed, while others have made progress. It's difficult to generalise, to put all countries in the same basket. Political changeover is taking place in more and more African countries. There is no shortage of examples. I can cite Nigeria, Senegal and, most recently, Ghana. In these countries, the political opposition has taken power. But there are also regressions in other countries, such as coups d'état and anti-constitutional changes: Niger, Mali, Burkina Faso, Gabon, Guinea, etc. So there are regressions. So there are regressions in some cases and progress in others. In South Africa, there is even a governing coalition. It's true that not all elections on the African continent are rigged or biased, and we can see this in the alternations that have become almost the norm. That doesn't stop us from continuing our efforts to ensure that the African Charter on Elections is truly applied across the continent. We must not give up and continue to work with these countries. The countries where anti-constitutional changes were made were

immediately sanctioned by the African Union. They were suspended from participation in continental bodies. To return to the concert of nations, they are obliged by the African Union to complete the transition process and transfer power to civilians through free and independent elections. These are the processes we are putting in place with countries that have been placed under sanctions. Now, not all countries are at the same level of economic development. The continent is diverse. The democratisation process began some thirty years ago, around 1990, with the introduction of a multi-party system. And the countries are moving forward, each at its own pace. There is one point to which I would like to draw the attention of those who think that the European or American model can be replicated everywhere. No, I don't believe that. Asia does not apply this model. That's not to say that China isn't a developed country. Take the example of Mali, Burkina Faso or Niger, where the changeover took place democratically. This did not prevent these elected regimes from being swept away by military putsches. The political analysis of African states when it comes to elections and democratic changeover must therefore be qualified. As Winston Churchill once said, a Western-style democracy is only "*the least bad political system*". Not the best!

Do we then need strong men and weak institutions?

No, on the contrary, they go hand in hand. The discrepancy is not good. The defining features of any state are its cultural specificities, its historicity and its complexities. All states have the same aspirations, but to achieve them, they don't all have the same institutions, nor the same internal circumstances. For me, a strong man always relies on strong institutions, otherwise he weakens. Creating strong institutions also helps lay the foundations for a democracy or a political system where popular participation is truly effective, and not just a façade. A country with strong institutions is also a guarantee of lasting peace and stability. Strong institutions are the seeds of the country's future development, and I'm among those who are calling for African states to consolidate national and continental institutions.

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

I believe that East Africa has experienced many wars in its contemporary history. When there are painful clashes in a region, the aftershocks, like an earthquake, have disastrous consequences. Over time, grievances on both sides become increasingly irreconcilable. There have been three wars between Ethiopia and Somalia, two of them in recent decades. Between South Sudan and Sudan there have been 40 years of war. Ethiopia's internal convulsions have alternated virtually throughout the last fifty years. Somalia, after its war with Ethiopia in 1977, has not managed to recover. These states are still destabilised by the consequences of these conflicts, which have weakened their institutions. Getting back on a sound footing takes time. This is why the Horn of Africa is lagging behind other regions of the continent, due to its troubled history over several decades. A history marked by internal conflict. This comment is an initial analysis. The second element that comes to mind is that it's an extremely strategic region, extremely important because it's at the crossroads of continents, and so instability is sometimes fuelled from outside. This is not a factor that should be neglected. If today the shebabs, foreign fighters and the profusion of weapons are so numerous in Somalia, I believe this can be partly explained by a form of interference by hostile forces maintained and supported from outside to achieve an agenda dictated to them. The same pattern can be seen in Sudan. This great country is in a way the heart of Africa. Look at Sudan's geographical position: it borders at least seven or eight countries. It's an extremely strategic country, and there's a lot of interest in controlling it, not to mention its mineral resources. The same applies to the countries of the Horn of Africa. We're on the world's busiest shipping lane. All the big countries in the world want to have a say in what happens here. So, interference is never far away, we mustn't ignore it. The Horn of Africa has precisely this weight of history, this

geostrategic asset that calls for, and encourages, this outside interference. And last but not least, this region has always been at the forefront of the continent's liberation movements. I'm thinking of all those thinkers, all those great men in the history of the 20th century, who made pan-Africanism. Many of them came from here: Julius Nyerere from Tanzania, Haile Selassie from Ethiopia, Jomo Kenyatta from Kenya, Hassan Gouled Aptidon from Djibouti. It wasn't just Nkrumah Kwame in the West, or Gamal Abdel Nasser in the North. All these leaders - my list is not exhaustive, of course - led liberation movements and played an essential role in the continent's destiny, and we should be proud of them. Taken together, these factors mean that the Horn of Africa remains a region under close surveillance.

A veritable war of interference - American, Emirati, European, Chinese and Russian - is unfolding before our very eyes, exacerbating antagonisms and crises on the continent. What can we do about it?

We live in a globalised world, and global security is collective security. International trade is also globalised, so we can't live in a situation of protectionism or isolation. We must not dream. We mustn't think that we can live on our own and that we don't want to hear about others. But we do need to organise our international relations in such a way that they are balanced, in useful partnerships, win-win as the Chinese say. If we manage to put in place agreements, contracts, treaties and conventions that manage these relations in a spirit of fairness and solidarity, we won't end up in situations of domination, interference and so on. The African Union itself has partnerships with the United Nations, the European Union, and bilateral ties with South Korea, Japan and China.

Why doesn't the African Union denounce or point the finger at such interference, even when it is clearly established in United Nations reports - I'm thinking of Sudan, for example, or the current crisis in the Great Lakes countries?

I'll come back to Sudan, but first I'd like to give you an example from the Great Lakes region: some countries accuse Rwanda of acting 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 mediator would no longer be possible. Take the crisis between Israel and Palestine. How can the United States of America claim to be a mediator in resolving this territorial dispute, which is over seventy years old, and in establishing the conditions for peaceful coexistence between these two peoples? How can they be so arrogant? They've already taken a stand! They are giving weapons and bombs to reduce all existing housing and infrastructure to rubble, rendering the area uninhabitable for decades to come. Tens of thousands of civilians are being massacred with impunity, and as if that weren't enough, they are proclaiming that they are planning to displace two million people from Gaza and settle them elsewhere than on their own land.

The African Union wants to avoid this kind of pitfall and bias, and preserve dialogue to bring the belligerents to their senses. It's not the United Nations, the European Union or the United States that are going to say what needs to be done to bring peace and silence the guns. If we are to make a proper diagnosis and try to resolve African problems with African solutions, Africa, the Commission, specialised institutions and 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 mandated to rebuild trust and ties between these two countries in conflict. Imagine if the meeting on February 7, which is to bring the two parties together, came to the conclusion that the African Union should take a public stance on the situation in the Great Lakes. I'm not sure that this would advance the *schmilblick*, or solve chronic problems. Some disagree, and advocate that the African Union should put its foot down. But has this worked elsewhere? Has this approach been constructive in the case of Ukraine? Have resolutions, international

condemnations and economic sanctions brought peace to Ukraine? If we want to move forward, we need to think outside the *box*. Our European friends are stuck in the posture they have adopted. But where is the solution? We have to get back to the discussion table, never break the thread of conversation, continue the exchanges, propose a form of negotiation, an arrangement, and to do this, it is essential that the mediating party can have the necessary detachment to try to find possible points of agreement.

The question of interference is a very sensitive one: how do you explain 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 decide for us, to protect us from the influence of Russian propaganda, tantamount to infantilising Africans? Paradoxically, Russia Today (RT) and Sputnik are still available in the USA on YouTube. Are you sure of this statement? I've seen many countries in Africa where RT and Sputnik are accessible. It's not a global ban. Perhaps packages from Europe have been able to remove Russian media from their programming. I don't know about YouTube, but what I do know is that if you have a DStv package, which can be found just about everywhere in Africa, these channels are available there. Finally, you should know that YouTube no longer has the global reach it once had. With TikTok and others stepping up to the plate, the competition is open.

After the double standards, shouldn't Africans leave the International Criminal Court (ICC)?

What is international law? International law was set up with its mechanisms and judicial institutions - the International Court of Justice, the International Criminal Court, etc. - to protect the rights of the peoples of the world. They were set up to preserve peace after the Second World War, as were many other institutions based on the same model, acting at regional or continental level, to create a situation of peace throughout the world. And if need be, to judge crimes against humanity, war crimes, genocide, ethnic cleansing... The crime of genocide in Rwanda has been perfectly established by these international judicial institutions. If these institutions cease to function, international justice will suffer, creating a situation of instability throughout the world. We cannot fail to understand this. These international institutions were created to preserve peace. If we start trampling them underfoot and bringing them into disrepute, or even sanctioning ICC judges because they have issued an arrest warrant for X or Y, we are putting world peace at risk. This is an observation that cannot be taken lightly. Secondly, I must point out that for a long time, the ICC was seen as a court for African politicians. Leaders of small influential countries, as well as large ones, are also being prosecuted for crimes of which they may have been presumed guilty, and others are even being arrested, such as Slobodan Milošević. The bottom line is that the ICC is an important international institution for world peace. It is necessary, it must be consolidated, its judicial decisions must not be tainted by political considerations, that's what's important. Some countries are not signatories to this treaty, but this does not limit the work of the institution, and particularly of its judges, who examine crimes. Whether your country is a member or not, those presumed guilty will be prosecuted and judged on their actions. This institution plays its part, and must continue to do so.

In a fragmenting world, where clashes of sovereignty take place in a changing environment, where the rules of international law are little used in negotiations or strategies of influence, isn't the will of most African countries not to align themselves put to the test? How can Africa take control of its own destiny? What future do you see for Africa in the new fragmented geopolitical and geo-economic order? How can we strengthen Africa's defense in the face of rising threats and covetousness?

I have a position on this question as a candidate for the presidency of the African Commission. Africa's place is in the global South. You see, we live in a world that is becoming polarised, and this polarisation has names: Brics, NATO, the European Union, the Indo-Pacific, and so on. I believe that the global South needs to organize itself and defend its interests in the same way as the other entities that are putting themselves on the same footing. For the time being, Africa cannot position itself alone in relation to these major global influence groups. The Indo-Pacific is a form of polarisation. The Indo-Pacific is the West working with a number of Asian countries to counter Chinese influence. NATO is about defending Europe and the United States, should one of the countries in this component be attacked. And in all these compositions, where does Africa fit in? We don't have the capacity to stand alone in this multipolar world. Until we can stand on our own two feet and face up to these new dangers that threaten us, let's take our rightful place alongside the global South, alongside the Brics. This is the position I would defend if elected.

A position reminiscent of the Bandung line?

The non-aligned movement, born in Bandung, Indonesia, in 1955, had its origins in the irreconcilable antagonisms between the two blocs of the time, the West and the East. At the time, there were two groups: the Warsaw Pact and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO). It was in this context that the non-aligned movement was born, and asserted its right not to belong to any military coalition. Since its creation seventy years ago, the world has evolved and changed. We need to keep pace with these new balances, and I believe that the new pole is the Brics, in which the countries of the global South can find themselves, inhabited by the spirit and philosophy advocated by the Bandung line. The trend is for the Brics to expand, and Africa will play its full part.

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