



Kenya Security Council Bid: David Fighting Goliath, Says Djibouti

By Miriam Abraham



The next five months are critical for Kenya in its bid to play a central role in matters of international peace and security. In June, the United Nations General Assembly will vote to decide which of Djibouti or Kenya will take up one of the non-permanent Security Council seats for Africa. Whichever country will be elected will serve for two years (2021-2022). It will be the second time for Djibouti to sit on the Council (1993-1994) and the third for Kenya, which previously served in 1973-74 and 1997-98.

African member states have established themselves as one of the most organised groups in the handling of the rotation of the three [non-permanent seats allotted to them](#). The African Group ensures that each of its five sub-regions (East, West, Central, North and South) has a chance at representation in a rotational arrangement. For instance, in 2019, South Africa replaced Ethiopia which had represented East Africa. In 2021-2022, the seat reverts to an East African country. The Executive Council, the second most powerful organ of the African Union (AU), has the responsibility of vetting candidates for the seats and is advised in these functions by a sub-set of ministers who sit on the Ministerial Committee on Candidatures.

Member states interested in Security Council seats inform the chair or dean of their respective sub-regional group. In case a sub-region submits more than one candidate, the AU Commission requests

the chair or dean of the sub-region to hold consultations and present a single country. In most cases, the sub-region agrees to either consider the other candidate for upcoming vacancies in other UN or AU organs including the Peace and Security Council or offers them the slot at the next opportunity. Once consensus is reached, the chair of the sub-region submits its candidate to the AU Commission for consideration by the Ministerial Committee on Candidatures, which meets twice a year (January and June).

When the vacancy for the Eastern African sub-region was announced in 2019, the African Union Commission received the candidacies of both Djibouti and Kenya from the dean of the sub-region, Djibouti. Diplomats based in Addis Ababa with knowledge of the deliberations, argue that this was a conflict of interest on the part of Djibouti; given that its candidacy had made it impossible for Djibouti to play its role of finding a consensus candidate, it should have recused itself and handed over the role of dean temporarily to another country. It did not help that the countries of the sub-region were split between Djibouti and Kenya, with neither enjoying overwhelming support from its neighbours. Therefore, instead of the sub-region trying to find a solution, it kicked the can down the road to the Ministerial Committee.

The Ministerial Committee and the Executive Council were unable to agree on a consensus candidate from either of the two countries during the AU Summit that took place in Niamey, Niger in July 2019. The Executive Council mandated the Permanent Representatives to the African Union (the Permanent Representative Committee) to resolve the matter under Egypt's leadership as the AU Chair but Egypt was unable to resolve the matter through consensus. It therefore resorted to voting, an unprecedented move on matters of candidacy. In a move that should worry Nairobi and which is [not accurately reported in the Kenyan media](#), it took seven rounds of votes for Kenya to garner the two-thirds majority required to be endorsed. On the first occasion, there were four rounds of votes with neither candidate garnering the two-thirds majority. The second occasion had three rounds of votes where on the third round, Kenya garnered the required two-thirds majority by bagging 37 votes to Djibouti's 13.

There was expectation that Djibouti would bow out of the race after the August 2019 vote. Instead, Djibouti announced that it was still in the race. Diplomatic efforts to have Djibouti stand down in favour of the African Union-endorsed candidate have faltered. President Abdel Fattah el-Sissi of Egypt brought together President Uhuru Kenyatta and President Ismail Omar Guelleh of Djibouti to discuss the matter at the margins of the United Nations General Assembly in September 2019 but this high-level diplomatic attempt failed. Djibouti has gone ahead and received the endorsement of the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) and that of the *Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie* (OIF).

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As it ramps up its [diplomatic charm and campaigns for the seat](#), Djibouti has sought to present itself as the underdog, David fighting Goliath. Djibouti argues that it was the first to declare its candidacy in 2016 and that Kenya has violated the spirit of sovereign equality of states and the practice of rotation of seats. It argues that for its small size, it has deployed more peacekeepers per capita and that it seeks the seat, not for "self-aggrandisement" but rather to serve Africa. In an underhand attack of the perceived transactional nature of Kenya's diplomacy, Djibouti presents itself as a "reliable partner" which has a record of working with "UN Member States, large and small, permanent and non-permanent members of the Security Council on ways to advance our common priorities".

On its part, Kenya has presented a [ten-point agenda](#) which it aims to fulfil during its tenure. The first is “Building Bridges”, which seems to be a very politically loaded title to use given the ongoing divisive “Building Bridges Initiative’ at the domestic level. Nairobi argues that it is well positioned to bridge differences between the African Union and the Security Council and to be a promoter of the rule-based international system. It touts its role in peacekeeping with over 40,000 troops deployed over the years. Nairobi argues that it is a regional powerhouse on matters of peace and security and a leader in the fight against terrorism and the prevention of violent extremism. The country hopes to promote the women, peace and security agenda as well as the empowerment of young people. It boasts of its role in humanitarian affairs especially in providing refuge to those fleeing war in South Sudan and Somalia. It also includes justice, human rights and democracy in its agenda. And in a nod to the UN Environment Programme hosted in Nairobi, Kenya lists climate change as one of its areas of focus as well as the achievement of the [sustainable development goals](#).

With both countries arguing that they are the voice of Africa, the positions they take on key international issues in the next few months will be critical for their campaigns. Diplomatic sources intimate that although Kenya has the backing of the African Union, it would be naïve to bank on the support of all the African countries. They argue that the same talking points that Kenya used to rally the support of some members of the African Group may backfire when used in the broader United Nations General Assembly membership. For instance, one African country which changed its mind in the last round of the African Union vote to support Kenya, did so because they were persuaded that it would not be a good idea for Africa to be represented at the Security Council by three countries with an Islamic and French-speaking background. Niger and Tunisia are the current members representing West Africa and North Africa, respectively.

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Djibouti may very well turn round the talking points of the Kenyan diplomats and use them to rally a large section of the 57 members of the Organization of Islamic Conference—which has officially endorsed it—to support its bid. Djibouti has a strong record of support to the Question of Palestine and other Middle East issues. It will certainly continue to play up the maritime dispute between Kenya and Somalia to rally Arab and Muslim countries to its side. Djibouti could also play the victim of an anti-Francophone bias to seek the sympathy votes of the 54 French-speaking countries. Of course Kenya has its share of friends in both the OIC and OIF membership, but it cannot afford to lose any Member State.

Kenya’s waning international standing will further complicate its candidacy. Within the African continent, Kenya is no longer at the centre of political or diplomatic initiatives. This has shifted over the years to Addis Ababa. There was a time when you could not speak of a single African political or peace process without it being hosted in Kenya or mediated by a Kenyan. Presidents Mwai Kibaki and Uhuru Kenyatta decided to take a back seat in these efforts which has denied the country the platform it could have used to campaign for the seat. It is worth noting that Ethiopia’s third bid for the Council seat in 2016 (to serve in 2017-2018) was uncontested. That Nairobi’s standing in the region is on the wane was evident in 2017 when Cabinet Secretary Amina Mohammed failed to get elected as the Chairperson of the African Union Commission, losing to Chad. The recent election of Sudan to chair IGAD, instead of the highly anticipated switch to Kenya, should make Nairobi worried about the long-term implications to its foreign policy agenda, if it has one.

Nairobi is also perceived as running a transactional foreign policy. It does not hold principled positions on issues of international peace and security. Many diplomats are quick to note that, with a

few exceptions, Nairobi's position on any issue is based on the price of the highest bidder. As one diplomat put it, "unpredictability is not good in diplomacy. They will say yes today and tomorrow they will take a different position." There are many countries who worry that Kenya will continue its transactional approach to Security Council issues at the expense of the interests of Africa".

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To be fair to Nairobi, although the elected members ostensibly represent Africa, they hold these seats in their national capacities. They definitely put their national interests first, including economic ones, before the positions of the continent. This is especially so in an era when [President Donald Trump](#) openly declares that countries that do not do its bidding will have their foreign aid cut. In Africa, there are many countries which have sanctioned their envoys for jeopardising financial aid by taking principled positions on issues. The most dramatic was in 2002 when Ambassador Jagdish Koonjul of Mauritius was recalled in the midst of a Security Council meeting for not openly supporting a United States resolution on Iraq.

Informal discussions with several diplomats indicate that so far, Kenya is a front-runner for the Security Council seat, boosted by the endorsement from the AU, which will probably be confirmed by the Heads of State at its [February Summit](#). However, the endorsement is non-binding and African countries may choose to vote for Djibouti, abstain or be absent on voting day. Kenya's squabbling with Somalia, its cozy relations with Ethiopia no longer, the mistrust with Tanzania, the on/off relations with Uganda—including the competition to host the UN Global Service Center among other regional rivalries—means that Nairobi goes into the race without any guarantee of receiving votes from its bloc.

In another sign of the waning support for Kenya within its sub-regional bloc, attempts to present a candidate for the position of Assistant Secretary-General at the 9th African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) Heads of State and Government [meeting in Nairobi](#) last year were met with strong opposition. Diplomats argue that Kenya's un-strategic move to seek positions in other bodies during its bid for the Security Council only strengthens Djibouti's contention that Nairobi is only interested in "self-aggrandisement". Nairobi could learn lessons from the common Swahili adage, *mtaka vyote, hukosa vyote*, or from the fable of the greedy hyena.

Djibouti and Kenya seem not to have managed to convince any of the veto-wielding council members (China, France, Russia, United Kingdom and United States) to throw their weight behind their candidacies. Both countries are close allies to the major powers. China has been quick to clarify statements from its officials perceived to be supporting either country. Both candidates have constantly reminded those who care to listen of their unique geo-political significance. However, Djibouti's location by the Red Sea, which straddles both the Middle East and Africa, cannot be underestimated. By being one of the few countries hosting American, Chinese and French military bases, it has a slight advantage with regards to these three veto-holding Security Council members. Kenya, on the other hand, could argue that as a regional economic powerhouse, it would be the better candidate. But one could argue that having a less economically powerful country on the Council would be more convenient for those interested in buying the country's influence. A cheaper puppet is certainly better than a costly one.

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As the campaign reaches a critical point, Kenya seems to be scoring an own goal. The decision to move Ambassador Monica Juma from the foreign affairs docket in the midst of the campaign was ill-advised. Lobbying for the Security Council seat very much depends on personal relationships built over time, which the new Cabinet Secretary, Ambassador Rachel Omamo, certainly does not have. It does not help that rather than have a dedicated Permanent Representative in New York, Nairobi decided to copy Djibouti and double-hat its affable and experienced Ambassador Lazarus Amayo to cover both New York and Washington DC. This means that there is insufficient political coverage in both these cities which have a central role to play in the June election. Nairobi will have to rely heavily on its highly respected Ambassador Tom Amollo to pick up the baton.

Nairobi will also need to widen its talking points beyond its ten broad themes. There are still many unanswered questions about its track record on matters of international peace and security. What foreign policy gains can be attributed to Nairobi during its term at the African Union Peace and Security Council? What does the country have to show for its five years as the holder of the Executive Secretary post at the International Conference for the Great Lakes Region (ICGLR)? How has it handled peace and security issues as one of the Deputy Executive Secretaries of the East African Community? What does the country have to show for the 11 years of Ambassador Mahboub Maalim tenure as Executive Secretary of IGAD, apart from Ethiopia's dominance of the organisation?

Failure to effectively counter these questions and address the concerns about reliability as an ally, among other grievances against it, Nairobi may be in for a surprise come June. This is especially because victory requires a vote by two-thirds of the member states. Djibouti's task will be to embarrass Nairobi into many rounds of votes, with the possibility of neither one receiving the required number of votes. There have been precedents of inconclusive votes the most recent of which was in 2016 when neither Italy nor the Netherlands was able to muster enough votes. They eventually agreed to split the term. Kenya may end up seeking a compromise of splitting the term with Djibouti, if the latter maintains its current stance. Nairobi still has five months to change tack, otherwise it may continue with its streak of faltering bids for international posts.

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