

Regional parliaments in Southern Africa: why SADC's project is doomed to fail

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Lubango, the capital city of the province of Huila in Angola, has embarked on the most central voyage of southern African foreign policy. From May 7th to 12th, Angola will be hosting the 29th Parliamentary Forum Plenary Assembly of the Southern African Development Community (SADC), a meeting set to establish parliamentary cooperation between the states of the region, by ambitiously evolving the current SADC Parliamentary Forum into a full blown legislative institution, the SADC parliament. Leading the programs is Namibian Esau Chiviya, the Secretary-General of SADC's Parliamentary Forum.

The SADC has not always capitalized as much as it could have politically with the international community. Created as the Southern African Development Coordination Conference (SADCC) in 1980, then established as the SADC in 1992, its purpose has always been to enhance social, economic, political and security cooperation in the Southern African region. Yet, from the start this inter-governmental organization was not able to fulfill all the expectations set upon it, since most of its problems derive not exclusively from its meager capacity to implement policies but from each member-state's domestic issues. As of late, one is reminded of the failure SADC had in mediating the Zimbabwean power-sharing crisis. Further east, SADC was obliged to suspend Madagascar in 2009 due to an unconstitutional change of government in the

country. Indeed, for an inter-governmental organization with almost 20 years of existence, SADC's member-states have so far been unable to provide it with the necessary political tools to arrange economic and security solutions to the variety of crises often spurring in Southern Africa. In the entirety of its scope, the economic vector is SADC's strongest and best chance of succeeding, although much has failed and much is still left to do. The organization has still not been able to construct a common market, adopt a common currency or even gather the Southern African Customs Union – where Botswana, Namibia and South Africa are members – under its aegis. Furthermore, its attempts to create a kind of Southern African energy grid, able to share energy requirements between member states – a critical issue for developing economies – has also failed to materialize. On the judicial front, the case of Mike Campbell against the Republic of Zimbabwe denounced the SADC tribunal's utter inability to enforce its decisions and overall sovereignty on member-states, proving a regional court system will hardly function in times to come.¹ The

¹ The Mike Campbell (Pvt) Ltd and others vs. Republic of Zimbabwe episode was a case presented by the former on which he accused the Zimbabwean government of denying access to justice based on racial discrimination against the white farmers who had lost their lands under the land reform program in Zimbabwe. The SADC Tribunal ruled in favor of Mike Campbell but was unable to enforce its judgment.



same principle applies to security arrangements in the region. SADC as an organization able – in principle – to deepen cooperation between its members in the security sector has slid by the entire Zimbabwean episode without a clear capacity to act. Registered violence in Angola, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Madagascar, Mozambique, Zimbabwe – to name a few –, has not been properly addressed by this organization, which fears harsher condemnation might further alienate several of its members already suspicious about its scope and mandate. Nevertheless, the above-mentioned issues have not stopped SADC and Esau Chiviya from advancing the idea of transforming the SADC Parliamentary Forum into a parliament with proper legislative powers. According to the SADC Secretary-General, the intended regional parliament might be a body with binding powers, whose guidelines should be compulsorily endorsed by member-states.² It is remarkably surprising how southern African leaders have decided to go ahead with such an unrealistic and ambitious political project when many of the states in the region are still not able to have properly functioning national parliaments.

The proposed legislative body is to mimic the African Union's Pan-African parliament to an extent, a weak start when considering the amount of comprehensive competences the African Union's parliament is lacking. Nevertheless, creating a regional parliament is never an easy task, especially in a region where different states have very different political systems. In Europe, where all European Union member-states share the same political system, its parliament has created segments of social upheaval within its population – namely in the fisheries and agriculture sectors – while not being successful in either functioning as a representative body capable of uniting Europe's peoples, or as a forum for discussion, surpassing the importance and centrality of national parliaments and limiting the development of the federative project.

² "Parlamento da SADC será um órgão com poderes vinculativos" (*Angola Press*, 6 June 2011).

Having a similar project implemented in Southern Africa is above all a very risky endeavor, the failure of which will delay further attempts at legislative unity for years, if not decades to come. In a region where conflict still exists, peace is often broken by localized power struggles and regimes are nothing but a patchwork of most political systems that have been attempted by mankind, the imposition of a SADC parliament with the ability to make states endorse its decisions is a project doomed to fail.

The sovereignty of many SADC countries dates back less than a century, some even half a century. Having this in mind, would it be wise for the Angolan government to enter such a political deal after 27 years of civil war to control the country? Should it be expected for Robert Mugabe to peacefully accept any decision by the parliament when he has already defied most of the international community and won? On the other hand, are South Africa, Botswana and Namibia able to influence other member-states into following the regional parliament road? In more practical terms, would it be sensible to see UNITA deputies cooperating with MPLA deputies in a single regional effort to force democracy on Zimbabwe, when Angola itself does not have presidential elections since 1992? How will Mozambique's FRELIMO and RENAMO deputies respond to such a challenges? The questions are many and the foreseeable answers too few. SADC's attempt to pull above its weight could potentially backlash and send the entire regional unity project into a dark era of meager collaboration and political division.

The underpinning reason setting this project to fail is the proven truth that there cannot exist a regional parliament with legislative powers able to force states to adopt compulsory measures and policies without a significant loss of sovereignty. Even today, perhaps only a handful of SADC's members have the conditions to undertake such a compromise, while most are sure to respond with suspicion and even hostility. Hopefully African leaders will understand the lack of conditions to pursue such a project and forfeit before the entire SADC hangs in the balance.

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