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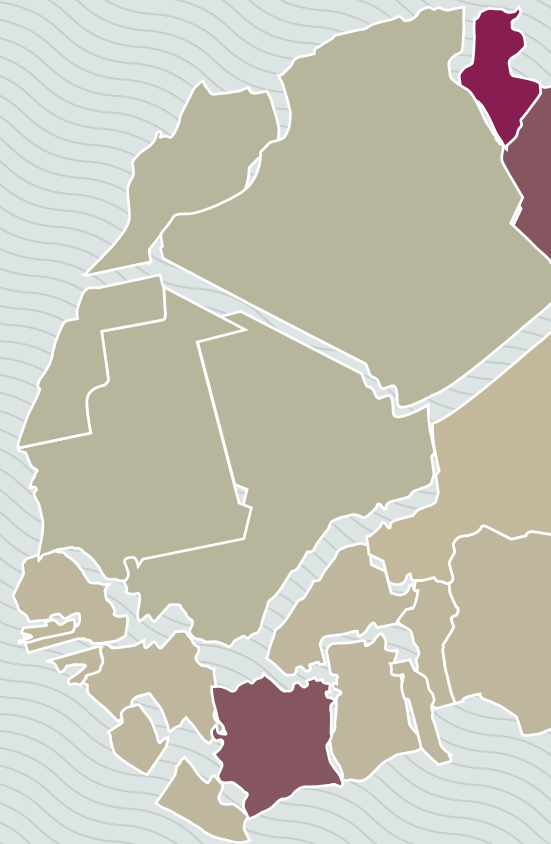
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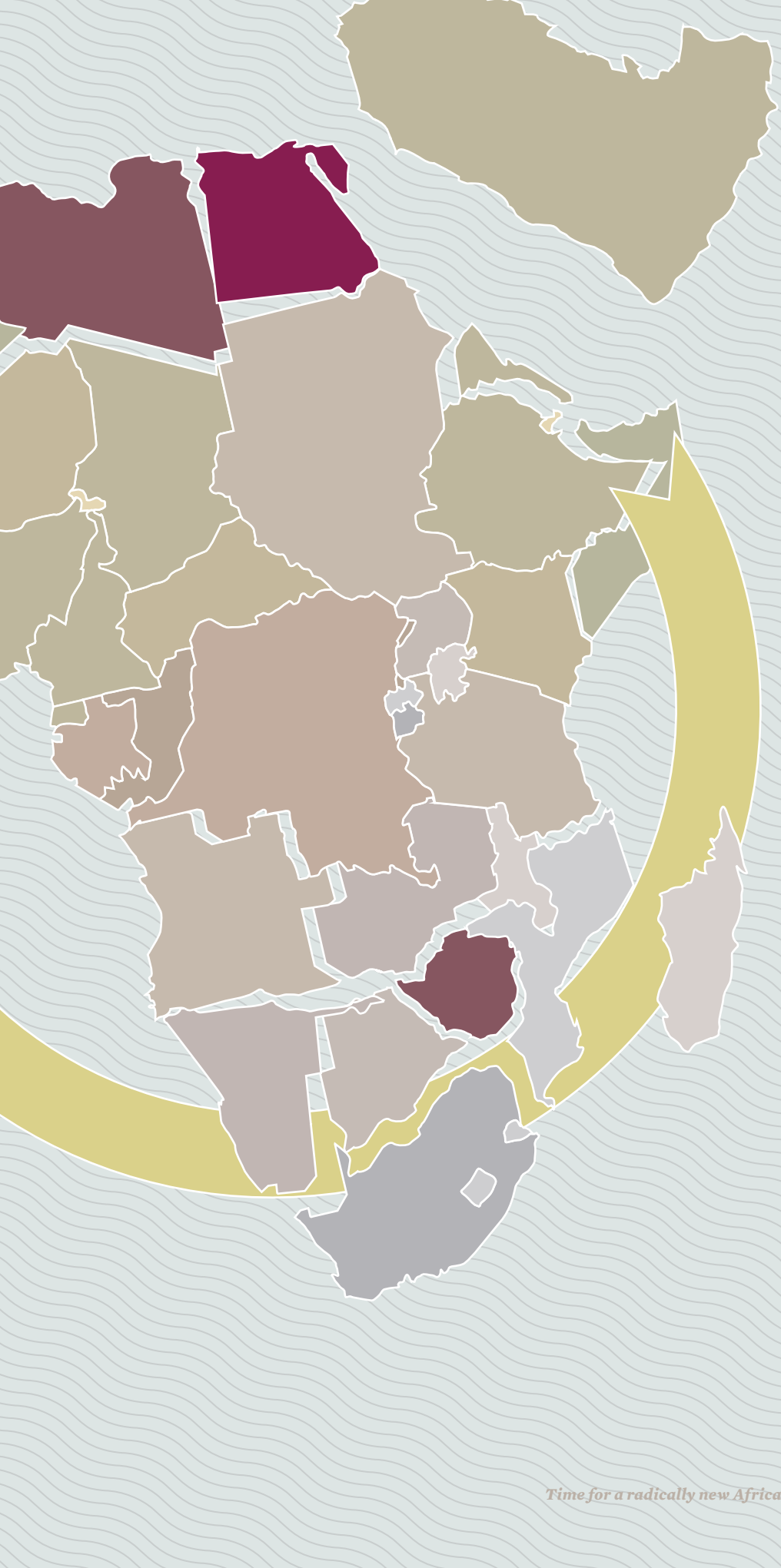
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William Gumede is Honorary Associate Professor, Graduate School of Public and Development Management, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. He is co-editor of the recently released *The Poverty of Ideas*, Jacana Press. His forthcoming book, *The Democracy Gap: Africa's Wasted Years*, is released later this year.



Time for a radically new African Union:

Only credible candidates may apply

William Gumede

There cannot be any clearer illustration of the impotence of Africa's continental and regional institutions to find local solutions to the continent's problems, than their numbing inaction in the face of the wave of popular rebellions against dictators in North Africa.

Africa's continental and regional institutions were conspicuously silent when popular uprisings kicked out autocratic leaders in Tunisia and Egypt. They have been equally clueless in dealing with the crisis in Libya, where people are rebelling against their ruler, Colonel Muammar Gaddafi, and he is fighting back violently. The major African Union (AU) mission to Libya was a massive failure. Intended to resolve the crisis, the AU delegation was comprised of African leaders, including South African President Jacob Zuma, who had all been allies of Gaddafi in the past and were therefore too compromised to come up with a fair deal.

For a long-time now there have been allegations that Zuma's campaign to dislodge former African National Congress (ANC) leader Thabo Mbeki was financed by Gaddafi. The other members of the delegation - President Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz of Mauritania, President Denis Sassou-Nguesso of Congo-Brazzaville, President Amadou Toumani Toure of Mali and the Chairperson of the AU itself, Jean Ping of Gabon - have all benefited from Gaddafi's largesse in the past. When they got to Tripoli, the AU mission appeased Gaddafi, offering him a peace plan that would have kept him in power and that was

“The idea of pan-Africanism in which all African countries will join together in a happy family is unworkable, unachievable and simply silly.”

rightly rejected by the Libyan opposition. In the absence of leadership from Africans, the United Nations and the traditional big powers stepped in to try to resolve the Libyan crisis.

African institutions and leaders also spectacularly failed to deal with the crisis in the Ivory Coast, where former strongman Laurent Gbagbo refused to step down after losing presidential elections to Alassane Ouattara. A panel of African presidents from South Africa, Chad, Mauritania and Tanzania failed in their negotiations. Once again, African leaders and continental institutions opted to sit on the fence and watch as another African country erupted into violence. Eventually, Gbagbo was forcibly removed from office by Ouattara's supporters. And once again, instead of African leaders and continental institutions playing a key role, it was left to the former colonial power, France, to intervene at crucial points and mobilise international pressure on Gbagbo to step down.

Africa's regional institutions have equally been impotent in dealing with local crises. The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) had one emergency meeting after another, but got nowhere close to resolving the Ivory Coast crisis. At these gatherings, Nigerian President Goodluck Jonathan promised 'united action', which never materialised. At one point, Jonathan even said of ECOWAS, "I have no doubt we have the will, the commitment and the collective resolve to bring to an end the unfortunate crisis in Cote d'Ivoire." But clearly, these attributes were lacking. The Southern African Development Community (SADC) has yet to stop Zimbabwean autocrat Robert Mugabe's tyranny against his own people. In fact, at crucial moments, SADC and regional leaders have actually reinforced Mugabe's power. Similarly, in Swaziland, King Mswati

has battered his people, but still receives the red-carpet treatment from SADC and his fellow rulers. The AU, of course, has not been any better with regards to Zimbabwe and Swaziland.

The AU - the home-grown continental structure set up to offer African solutions to African problems - has also fared dismally in a host of other African hotspots. It has fallen far short in trying to broker an end to the years of bloody conflict in Sudan's Darfur region. It did not come to grips with the crippling food and fuel shortages or the high inflation that plagued the continent - all of which were, at least partly, due to bad local leadership, mismanagement and lack of democracy. Unsurprisingly, African countries worst hit by food shortages - including Zimbabwe, Egypt, Cameroon, Gabon and Ethiopia - are also among the continent's most autocratic, and are where the AU's silence has been most deafening. Common responses to other common regional problems, such as the HIV and AIDS pandemic and the devastating impact of the global financial crisis, have also been conspicuous by their absence.

For all their rhetoric about 'African unity', AU member states have rarely voted together in international fora to safeguard common African interests. The 'unity' records of regional institutions such as SADC and ECOWAS are similarly compromised. Individual countries are often bought off by big new powers or by their former colonial rulers. Indeed, continental and regional institutions possess no uniform, mutually beneficial policy towards interacting with outside powers. For example, China picks and chooses its policies for different African countries - deliberately buying off individual leaders to prevent a united African response. Africa has also been divided about how to respond to the European Union's economy-undermining

Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs), which have been rejected by some countries and embraced by others. EPAs force African nations not to enter into trade deals with countries or regions competing with the EU. A common response from African continental and regional institutions would have made it difficult for the EU to punish nations that were not signing up or to play countries off against each other.

Indeed, the only signs of real unity have occurred when Africa's gang of dictators have clubbed together behind the facade of the AU, SADC or ECOWAS to shield each other from criticism by ordinary Africans, civil society groups and outsiders while they are battering their citizens into submission.

It is now a truism that Africa's prosperity in an increasingly uncertain, rapidly changing world depends on even closer political, economic and trade integration between countries. Africa's future prosperity lies in individual countries pooling their markets, development efforts and attempts to seriously build democracy. For hundreds of years now, African countries have been pawns in the hands of the big powers, which have meddled in their domestic politics, caused civil wars and exploited their produce, commodities and environment. African countries desperately need the stability, security and the independence to make policies freely that only a continental 'pooling of resources and cooperation' can provide. African countries will have to come up with common strategies to leverage, for example, China and other emerging markets' increased trade and investment interests in Africa.

But the current leadership of regional and continental institutions are too discredited, the institutions too toothless and the rules for membership too lenient. The solution is to radically overhaul regional institutions such as the AU and SADC. African countries will have to bring new energy, ideas and leaders to make regional and continental institutions work. The ways in which many African leaders and institutions generally think about closer integration is outdated. The idea of pan-Africanism in which all African countries will join together in a happy family is unworkable, unachievable and simply silly. To continue clinging to these concepts will mean that Africa is unlikely to reach its full potential

in this generation and will not become as prosperous as say the East Asian tigers.

The current wave of rebellions against dictators that started in North Africa, the global financial crisis, and the rise of emerging countries such as China, Brazil and India, which is likely to remake the world, offers a critical juncture for African countries to pursue thorough-going reforms of continental and regional institutions. In fact, given the rupture that the global financial crisis is causing to nations, the continent may end up poorer unless it changes direction. But how? For starters, African unity must be selective.

The basis of a revamped African Union must start with a small club of countries that can all pass a double 'stress' test based on the quality of their democracy and the prudence of their economic governance. When former South African President Thabo Mbeki launched the New Partnership for Africa's Development (Nepad) in 2000, it included a peer review mechanism through which African leaders could monitor their peers to see if they were adhering to good governance and were genuinely democratic¹. However, the peer review mechanism was voluntary and leaders could opt out without any consequences. Basing membership of continental and regional institutions on such loose criteria is wrong.

When the final decision was made on the structure of the AU in 2001, the group led by South Africa, which wanted the AU to be more like the EU with selective membership based on meeting certain democratic and development criteria, was defeated by countries led by 'big men', including Libya and Zimbabwe². This has proven to be a very costly loss. The AU has no minimum entry requirements for countries in relation to the quality of their democracy or economic management. Countries like Zimbabwe and Swaziland (and many others) can join even though their governments boast appalling human rights records and have spectacularly mismanaged their economies. This means that Zimbabwe and all the other rogue regimes across Africa can be fully-fledged voting members and help to determine the outcome of crucial decisions.

The AU must start from scratch with a three-track membership system. Along with a core club of 'first-track' countries that

meet the minimum democratic and economic governance criteria, there should be a 'second-track' of states, which did not make the grade in democratic and economic management terms, but which are serious about pursuing the new objectives of the AU. This second group would be set basic targets to reach before they are allowed into the elite group and each country would be assessed on an annual basis to ascertain when it had achieved the minimum requirements and was ready to join the club. The rest, the 'third-track' of nations, would be the continent's assortment of dictatorships. They would be shunned.

By compelling members and potential members to follow a set of good social and economic policies, the citizens of African countries who are outside the AU - perhaps because their leaders refuse to adhere to minimum standards of good governance - would have a clear set of policies against which they could measure their governments' performances. Citizens of non-member countries would also be able to use the AU's good governance criteria to put pressure on their governments to deliver. This would energise many African nations as their citizens would finally be able to measure their governments' actions - whether members of the AU or not - against credible, continent-wide good governance norms.

Of course, there are not many African countries that would pass such a test right now. Stricter rules would mean that the reconstructed AU would start off as a very small club of countries. At best, perhaps only South Africa, Mauritius, Botswana, Cape Verde and Namibia would qualify - and even then, only if some of the criteria were flexibly applied! As the rest of the continent watched from the sidelines, these countries would draw up democratic targets as well as development plans in consultation with the AU, which would then monitor the implementation of the plans. The countries in this elite tier would harmonize their economic policies, foreign and democratic governance. The movement between these countries of skills, people and goods could be eased. They could also club together to create the first African-wide set of industrial policies and long-term economic development strategies aimed at lifting African countries up

the industrial value chain.

The AU of core countries would also be able to adopt joint positions on foreign policy and act as a voting bloc on multilateral organisations, international treaties and on common issues, such as climate change. The AU could also directly negotiate with say China when trade deals were struck to come up with the most beneficial trade deals for individual countries. A standing African peacekeeping force could be set up as well with contributions from members of the core group, and those of the second group, through the principle of 'flexible' union.

Countries that adhered to the AU's democratic and economic management criteria could be rewarded with new investments, development projects and support, while those who did not would be excluded until they improved. Special Africa Funds could be set up, perhaps using proceeds from commodities, to finance social and physical infrastructure across the continent. Proceeds from such funds would then be distributed on the basis of the level or willingness of nations to reform their economies and build better democracies. These funds could then be used to target underdeveloped areas in those countries. However, it is not that 'third-track' countries should be sidelined totally. Funds, resources and support could still be given to them, based on strict criteria of adherence to democratic and prudent economic governance rules.

But it's not just the structure of the AU and regional bodies that must change, but also their focus. Up until now, the critical peace and security policies of continental and regional institutions have concentrated on ensuring state security, rather than human security. This wrong-headed principal is the reason why African leaders shield despots, such as Mugabe, from criticism, rather than coming to the aid of their desperate citizens. Under the AU's predecessor, the Organisation of African Unity, African presidents were more important than the continent's people. This has remained unchanged under the AU and other regional institutions. And so has the custom that African leaders always side with the fellow rulers when they are criticised by the West, and especially by former colonial powers, no matter the merits of the criticism. African solidarity can no longer

be based on leaders, but on values, such as democracy, social justice, clean government, ethnic inclusiveness and peace, and on protecting ordinary Africans from disease, violence and hunger, and prudently managing economies and natural resources for the benefit of the continent's people.

If Africa wants to emulate some of Europe's successes, in terms of both democracy and economic development, African countries will need to cede some of their sovereignty. The AU's Charter will have to be amended so that it does not focus on protecting the sovereignty of individual countries but on protecting the security of Africans themselves. The African principle of non-interference in the affairs of neighbours was shaken by the Rwandan genocide. Yet, it still partially informs the AU, which remains very reluctant to intervene forcefully in misgoverned nations. This must change.

And the situation on the ground is already changing. A combination of social and economic integration, caused by globalization's adjuncts of migration, urbanization and the free flow of information, means that borders are increasingly meaningless³. There are no 'national' crises in Africa anymore: a crisis in one African country will quickly morph into a regional crisis, which in turn will affect the whole continent⁴. Zimbabwe's problems are South Africa's problems and Botswana's problems – and indeed the continent's problems. Similarly, in East Africa, if Kenya catches a fever, so too do Uganda, Tanzania, Rwanda, Burundi and the Democratic Republic of the Congo⁵.

Furthermore, there is not much provision currently for ordinary African citizens to directly influence the decisions of the AU and regional institutions, which have always been wary of allowing civil society, let alone their voting citizens, to scrutinise their plans and their operations. Perhaps referenda could be introduced into the new AU so that ordinary citizens, electorates and civil groups could effectively voice their views about crucial policies.

Indeed, a revamped AU and restructured regional institutions could play an important role in building a new democratic political culture across the continent's 56 states. Importantly, the fact that most African countries are so ethnically, linguistically and culturally diverse means that democracy

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and inclusive development must be the glue of any nation-building process. But many African countries have still not transformed the limited democratic institutions, restrictive laws and official powers inherited from colonial days into more relevant ones. In others, where democratic institutions such as parliaments and human rights commissions have been set up, they exist in name only. In fact, genuinely democratic political cultures are still lacking in many countries.

The revamped continental and regional institutions could begin to address this democratic deficit by compelling their members to pursue certain policies – and thereby encourage non-members to do the same. For example, the new AU must compel its members to scrap all repressive laws, such as the 'insult laws' that are still on the statute books of most African countries and that outlaw criticism of the president. A citizen from a member country must also have recourse to the new body, if that citizen has been brutalised by his or her government. Gender equality must be the basis of all AU business. Every member country must adhere to two-term limits for presidencies and there must be a transparent procedure to impeach rulers who start off as democrats but turn into tyrants, so that

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Endnotes

1. NEPAD Secretariat. 2005. The African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM) base document. <http://nepad.org/2005/files/documents/49pdf>; and Country self-assessment for the African Peer Review Mechanism. <http://www.nepad.org/2005/files/documents/156.pdf>.

2. The leaders of the group ran a campaign suggesting South Africa was influenced by the West, therefore, its proposal to make the AU more EU-like in its selectivity. Mbeki himself was under attack at the time by old guard African leaders who alleged that he was under the influence of the West. This damaged his reputation among fellow African peers. Since then, Mbeki went all out to appear more African than other leaders, even to the extent of not criticising Zimbabwe's Robert Mugabe for his human rights abuses in his country, lest he was tagged as parroting the West.

3. Githongo, J. and Gumedede, W. 2008. Let the African Union set democratic standards. The Financial Times. July 1.

4. This is clearly illustrated by the fact that a crisis says in Zimbabwe or Sudan clouds investor perceptions of the whole of Africa. Outsiders often lump a crisis in one country as affecting the whole continent. This problem has been further illustrated by South Africa's efforts in the mid-1990s to sell itself as a stable country separate from other African crises ridden countries. This has not been very successful, as Afro-pessimism in the West lump any political or economic problem in South Africa, however minor, as a general affliction of all of Africa. Botswana, one of Africa's most consistently prudently managed economies and democracy, has often suffered the same fate.

5. Githongo, J. and Gumedede, W. 2008. Let the African Union set democratic standards. The Financial Times. July 1.

we do not see the likes of Mugabe again. The new AU must also set new minimum standards of conduct and operation for ruling and opposition parties, many of which are too undemocratic, corrupt and tribally based to be able to lead the continent in a new era of quality democracy and prudent economic management.

In fact, the restructuring must go further. There is also a need to establish real, effective pan-African institutions, such as a continent-wide Supreme Court and a Constitutional Court. These should be independent and have jurisdiction over prescribed areas in member states, so that when tyrants like Mugabe emerge, they can no longer depend on the acquiescence or support of fellow rogues.

Obviously these are very radical suggestions and many people will reject them as unfeasibly far-fetched. But Africa urgently needs an 'inclusive and forward-looking' democratic and economic development project, which goes beyond the lacklustre and superficial ones that have been pursued up to now. Political and economic development integration on a continental level, if done seriously, could well be the project that finally lifts Africa out of its long stagnation.

But the African integration project must be genuinely democratic, giving ordinary citizens a real say in the decisions that will ultimately impact on their lives. The debate on the future of the continent cannot be limited to leaders or the elite - as is the case currently. Post-independence Pan Africanism failed to build a sense of ownership among African citizens of African integration projects because they were always top-down, leadership focused, exclusive and non-participative rather than bottom-up, citizen driven, inclusive and participative. The current efforts of the AU and the other regional institutions are in danger of failing for the same reason. Beyond the cosy discussions among the leaders and the elites, there is still no genuine, participative Africa-wide debate about the future of the continent.

Continental and regional institutions must now urgently be reformed, to close Africa's gaping democracy gap, to raise the continent onto the next level of democratic building and consolidation, and to ensure enduring stability and equitable growth. ○

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Academic article

So near, yet so far:

The tragedy of media reforms since the GPA

Rashweat Mukundu & Nhlanhla Ngwenya

Zimbabwe has been under a cloud for much of the 21st century starting in the year 2000, when President Robert Mugabe and the Zimbabwean African National Union Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) lost a constitutional referendum to the new opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) and civil society. The resultant attempt by ZANU-PF to regain political control led to years of chaos during which opposition supporters were killed, commercial farms were invaded and the economy was ruined.



Rashweat Mukundu is a Zimbabwean Journalist, Media, Freedom of Expression and Human Rights Activist. He currently works with civil society in Zimbabwe and SADC region on media and human rights programmes.



Nhlanhla Ngwenya is the Director of the Media Institute of Southern Africa-Zimbabwe Chapter (MISA-Zimbabwe). He is a media and freedom of expression activist with huge experience in media monitoring and analysis.