

The Democratic Republic of Congo's Chairmanship of the African Union

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1 A Particular Political Context

It is no overstatement to consider the run-up of his chairmanship of the African Union (AU) politically more important to President Félix Antoine Tshisekedi Tshilombo (b. 1963) than occupying the seat itself. When Tshisekedi was announced the winner of the controversial December 2019 elections in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), a high-level AU meeting chaired by Rwandan president Paul Kagame, concluded that 'there were serious doubts on the conformity of the provisional results'.¹ The AU decided to dispatch a high-level delegation to Kinshasa comprising the AU chairperson and the AU Commission (AUC) chairperson. However, the Congolese authorities pressed ahead and proclaimed the electoral results. Tshisekedi was sworn in as president and he formed a governing alliance with former President Joseph Kabila's (2001–2019) Common Front for Congo (FCC). Meanwhile, the AU cancelled its planned mission. In addition to the rapidly evolving situation on the ground, the AU's decision was likely impacted by the lack of popular rejection of the official electoral result. As Tshisekedi supporters celebrated the outcome, after months of violent riots and unrest, the streets of Kinshasa remained calm.

The international controversy was nevertheless visible during the inauguration. The only visiting head of state was Kenyan president Uhuru Kenyatta. A few weeks after taking office, Tshisekedi attended the 32nd AU Assembly (Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, 10–11 February 2019).² Before and during the summit, the new president had numerous bilateral meetings, and Tshisekedi left Addis Ababa as the second vice-president of the Union and probable chairperson for the 2021 mandate. This continental recognition effectively torpedoed the viability of enduring attempts by the Congolese opposition to challenge the electoral outcome. Tshisekedi entered Addis Ababa under a cloud and left the summit legitimised by his peers. In the following months, Tshisekedi would travel

¹ *France 24* [Paris], 18 January 2019.

² Tshisekedi's first foreign visit was to Angola, followed by Kenya and the Republic of Congo.

widely across the globe to firmly establish his legitimacy. This diplomatic activity was crucial to the domestic audience. After years of a deepening and violent political crisis, the DRC was now increasingly visible and active on the world scene. With his legitimacy guaranteed, this international and regional recognition and visibility brought security. It was also quite a stylistic break after the more introverted Kabila.

The next and unavoidable step was now emancipation from his predecessor and coalition partner. In February 2021, when the DRC assumed the AU chairmanship the country was in the final stages of this major political transition. On 6 December 2020, nearly two years after his installation, Tshisekedi announced the end of the coalition with Kabila. By that time, the coalition government had effectively stopped functioning normally. It would last until the end of April 2021 for the country to again have a functioning government. In the meantime, most of the management of the state was left to the formal and informal networks operating around the Tshisekedi presidency.

The political developments in Kinshasa were a crucial step in the ongoing attempt to transform the governance of the country after more than two decades of increasingly authoritarian rule. These developments and the management of the political processes to build a new political coalition, the 'sacred union', concentrated President Tshisekedi's attention close to home. Given the nature of the country's political system, this also included the careful management of the security services, which had been central to the Kabila system of governance and whose officials have mostly remained loyal to Kabila. The complexities and potential dangers of this profound transition could not be better symbolised by the events at the end of Tshisekedi's chairmanship of the Union. On 5 February 2022, after the handover to Senegalese president Macky Sall, Tshisekedi left Addis Ababa in great haste due to the surprise arrest of his national security advisor, François Beya. Rumours of the preparation of a coup d'état were buzzing, very symbolic at an AU Assembly that had discussed the continental response to military coups after the events in West Africa and Sudan during 2021.

In addition to the consolidation of the new political alliance, the Tshisekedi government also focused a lot of its attention in the early months of 2021 on the conflicts in the eastern DRC. First, in May 2021, Tshisekedi decreed a 'state of siege' in the provinces of North Kivu and Ituri. This suspended civilian administrators and elected provincial bodies, effectively putting both provinces under the control of Kinshasa and the military. Second, the president spent three weeks touring both provinces. Third, a new initiative for the disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration (DDR) of Congolese armed groups was launched. Fourth, the Congolese government reached out and signed

(mostly economic) agreements with its neighbours in the east. Lastly, regional diplomacy acted as a basis for a Ugandan military intervention in North Kivu in a joint initiative to rout the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF). Since then, there have also been increasing signs and concerns about more discrete operations in the border regions by Rwanda and Burundi – all focused on dealing with their respective armed opposition groups operating in and from the eastern DRC.

2 The DRC and the African Union

The DRC has not played an active or particularly meaningful role in the development of the AU. Rather, the lack of agency of the AU's predecessor, the Organisation of African Unity (OAU), in the successive regional wars (1996–1997 and 1998–2003), of which the country formed the unenviable centre, was one of the boosters in transforming the continental organisation. Until the demise of his regime in May 1996, former President Joseph Mobutu Sese Seko (1965–1997), once chairperson of the OAU in 1967, was one of the autocratic faces of the continent that the AU founders sought to permanently ban to the history books. The successive and heavily regionalised Congolese conflicts, also dubbed the 'First African World War' that came on the heels of the 1994 Rwandan genocide, were a particularly challenging environment for the continental and regional organisations. The conflicts involved direct military confrontations between African armies on Congolese soil. The regimes of Laurent-Désiré Kabila (1997–2001) and the initial years for his son Joseph Kabila (2001–2019) were defined by bilateral and regional arrangements, mostly with the Southern African Development Community (SADC) to ensure regime survival in the conflicts with its eastern neighbours Rwanda, Uganda, and (to a much lesser degree) Burundi.³

Pushed by South Africa, the AU and SADC were actively engaged in the Congolese and regional dimension of the peace processes alongside the United Nations (UN). Between the signing of the 2003 *Sun City Agreement*, which led to the Congolese transition period from 2003 to 2006, the AU (both the AUC and the chairperson) was part of the International Committee Supporting the Transition in the DRC (CIAT), chaired by a UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General (SRSG).

3 The DRC became a SADC member in 1998. In the second war (1998–2003), SADC member states Angola, Zimbabwe, and Namibia intervened in support of the Kabila government, leading to major internal issues within the organisation.

After the 2006 elections, when Joseph Kabila gained democratic legitimacy, the DRC government sought to limit the role of international and regional actors in its domestic politics. At regional and continental meetings, the DRC remained mostly in the shadows, while its enduring conflicts and political crises continued to figure prominently on the agendas of AU and SADC summit meetings. In 2010, ahead of the 2011 presidential elections, the AU opened a Liaison Office in Kinshasa. During the 2012 conflict with the M23 and the renewed tension with Rwanda, the AU rose again to some prominence. Together with the European Union (EU), SADC, and the UN, it became one of the guarantors of the *Peace-Security and Cooperation Framework Agreement* (PSCF). This agreement was signed in Addis Ababa on 24 February 2013, but the AU only played a marginal role in its follow-up, which was mostly in the hands of the newly created post of the UN Special Envoy for the Great Lakes Region, working from Nairobi.

Since 2015, a political crisis began to brew in Kinshasa due to President Kabila's attempt to prolong his stay in power. Several of the DRC's immediate neighbours, including Angola and Rwanda and other influential players on the continent such as South Africa, considered a prolongation of the Kabila presidency as a cause for concern and a guarantee for continued regional instability and therefore maintained pressure on the regime to effectively organise constitutionally respected elections. The AU stepped up in 2016 by appointing the late Edem Kodjo (Togo), a member of the AU Panel of the Wise, as facilitator for a national dialogue in the DRC. Kodjo was, however, distrusted by a considerable part of the opposition that boycotted the dialogue. The AU played no meaningful role in the *Saint Sylvester Agreement* that followed, a process led by the Congolese Catholic Church. In the same year, Ambassador Abdou Abarry (Niger) was appointed to head the AU Liaison Office in Kinshasa.

Over the past decades, the DRC has been mostly passive in international, regional, and sub-regional institutions. The last membership within the UN Security Council (UNSC) dates from 1990–1991, and except for the executive chairmanship of the International Conference on the Great Lakes Region (ICGLR) between 2011 and 2016, the country has had no major leadership positions in the Regional Economic Communities (RECs) or within AU institutions. The main Congolese actors in Addis Ababa were Marie Madeleine Kalala-Ngoy, a member of the AU Panel of the Wise (2010–2014), and Francine Muyumba Furaha, president of the Pan-African Youth Union (2015–2019). The Pan-African Institute for Education and Development (IPED), a specialised institution of the AU, is headquartered in Kinshasa and functions as the observer institution of education in Africa.

President Kabila was the first (2015–2016) and second (2014–2015) vice chairperson of the AU. But this hardly left a mark. The second mandate was entirely eclipsed by the controversies surrounding the chair of Zimbabwean president Robert Mugabe. From early 2015, the DRC entered a profound and violent national political crisis when Kabila sought to seek a third mandate and prolong his hold on power. The introverted Kabila was rarely seen on the international scene and did not manage to build an extensive relationship with most of his peers or other international leaders.

In the domain of peace and security, despite appearing numerous times on its agenda, the DRC remains one of the few African states that has yet to ratify the 2002 *Protocol Relating to the Establishment of the Peace and Security Council of the African Union* (African Union 2002). On 15 February 2019, in one of his first speeches as president, Tshisekedi promised a signature ‘in the next days’ – but it has not happened yet. The DRC participated in the AU’s Regional Task Force for the elimination of the Lords’ Resistance Army (LRA) from 2013. This is part of the *Regional Co-operation Initiative for the Elimination of the LRA* (RCI-LRA) authorised by the AU in November 2011. The initiative has been mostly inactive since 2017 after the closure of the joint intelligence operations centre of the UN Organisation Stabilization Mission in the DRC (MONUSCO), the departure of US advisors, and the withdrawal of Ugandan troops from the mechanism. The LRA remains active in the border areas between the DRC and the Central African Republic (CAR).

The world’s largest hydropower project, also by far the DRC’s main infrastructure venture, the Grand Inga Hydropower Project is one of the AU’s *Agenda 2063* flagship projects. The overall scheme, involving the refurbishment and construction of a network of dams on the Congo River, could reach a 40,000 MW of power generation and cover 40 per cent of the African electricity supply. The massive project includes a wide range of partners, including South Africa, the Suez Canal Economic Zone Authority, the African Development Bank, and the AUC. In June 2020, a pan-African conference on the project and hydroelectricity in the DRC was organised with the AU High Representative for Infrastructure Development in Africa, Raila Odinga (Kenya).⁴

At the 30th Summit of the African Peer Review Forum (virtual, 25 March 2021), the DRC joined the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM).⁵ During its plenary session on 2 April, the Congolese Senate adopted the bill authorising Tshisekedi to ratify the *African Continental Free Trade Agreement* (AfCFTA). On

4 *African Development Bank Press Release* [Addis Ababa], 25 March 2021.

5 URL: <http://grand-inga.org/site%20uk.htm#xl_Xxr_v4_CONFERENCE:32PROGRAM> (accessed: 30 June 2022).

3 July, Tshisekedi met the AfCFTA secretary-general, Wamkele Mene, to discuss trade development in Africa. As AU chairperson, Tshisekedi declared his readiness to contribute effectively to the fulfilment of the commitments made by the AfCFTA member states. The DRC foreign trade minister noted that the DRC established a AfCFTA follow-up committee and took measures to fulfil its commitments. On 14 April, Tshisekedi signed the legislation ratifying the DRC's membership in the AfCFTA.

The DRC has some delays in fulfilling its financial obligations to the AU, as well as to the RECs. According to a mid-2021 internal report by the Congolese foreign ministry, the arrears to the AU were \$3.2 million and \$4.4 million to SADC. In January 2022, just before the election of the chair of the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS), the Congolese minister for regional integration called for his government to pay the \$6.9 million in arrears to the organisation.

The arrears and other issues indicate a structural problem that was laid bare in a August 2021 internal report by the Congolese foreign ministry. It shows an alarming situation at the ministry with embassies being underfunded and under pressure together with a largely insufficient infrastructure. As is the case with other parts of the government apparatus, the deficiencies are doubled by an expanding machinery of the presidency and in the personal offices of key government officials.⁶ Top-level diplomacy is to a large extent a domain identified with the head of state, but in the DRC, this is taken to the extreme. This has helped Tshisekedi in revamping the DRC's presence on the international scene. However, as is the case in other areas of government, there is a strong disconnect between the presidential declarations and their implementation.

3 Covid-19 Response and Controversy

During the DRC's position as AU chairperson, the international attention remained focused on managing the global fallout of the Covid-19 crisis. The African response to this crisis remained to a large extent managed by the previous chairperson, South African president Cyril Ramaphosa (the 'AU Covid champion'), working closely with the Africa Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (Africa CDC) (see *Yearbook on the African Union 2020*, 15–22 &

⁶ To support the Congolese chairmanship, a specific panel was established within the Office (cabinet) of the President. The panel, composed of eight personalities, was coordinated by Alphonse Ntumba Luaba, a former minister for human rights, who was the executive secretary of the ICGLR from 2011 to 2016.

40–48). In 2021, the AU established the Commission on African Covid-19 Response, chaired by President Ramaphosa and the Africa CDC. In its response to the crisis, the African continent remained in a fragile position. It lacked the resources and technical/industrial base to effectively contribute to the roll-out of the vaccines developed in the EU, the United Kingdom, the United States, the Russian Federation, and China. Despite the efforts of many African leaders, together with the programmes that have been put in place with donors and pharmaceutical partners, the continent trails behind in vaccination statistics.

Tshisekedi's role in the Covid-19 response was mostly limited to partaking in the numerous international meetings and conferences, voicing the concerns of the continent. This included the conference 'Africa Vaccine Manufacturing' (virtual, 12 April 2021), convened by the AUC chairperson and the Africa CDC. The two-day meeting focused on the development and manufacture of vaccines by Africa itself for its health security. Other participants included the presidents of South Africa, Rwanda, Senegal, and the director-general of the World Health Organization (WHO).

On 17 May, in Paris, Tshisekedi attended the two-day France-Africa Summit on Financing African Economies, hosted by French president Emmanuel Macron.⁷ The aim of the summit was to support African economies, weakened by Covid-19, by mobilising financial support, including funding by the International Monetary Fund (IMF). At the end of the France-Africa summit, Tshisekedi noted the importance of vaccination for the African continent. He also suggested that the reluctance to vaccination on the African continent might stem from the fact that the vaccines were produced outside Africa. To overcome the challenge, he stressed that vaccines should also be produced on the African continent, with intellectual property rights shared to allow African countries to produce the vaccines.

The AU's position on vaccinations was at first marked by some controversy. Tshisekedi had initially showed hesitation to be vaccinated himself, despite having lost several close relatives and friends. He then doubled down on the doubts regarding the Astra Zeneca vaccine, for months the only vaccine available in the country.⁸ During a press conference on 27 August in Berlin with former German chancellor Angela Merkel and South African president Ramaphosa, Tshisekedi sidestepped the narrative to promote some non-validated anti-Covid medication. He was only vaccinated in September, a

⁷ See *Africanews.com* [Lyon], 21 May 2021.

⁸ *France 24 TV* [Paris], 3 July 2021. URL: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cfT2O5qwVao>> (accessed: 30 June 2022).

six-month delay, when the Moderna vaccine became available in the DRC.⁹ On 21 September, during the 76th Session of the UN General Assembly (UNGA), Tshisekedi also addressed the Covid-19 vaccine situation in Africa.

4 Chairmanship Theme and Initiatives

The Congolese chairmanship was placed under the theme 'Arts, Culture and Heritage: Levers for Building the Africa We Want'. This led to a number of initiatives. On 27 November, Tshisekedi participated in the second edition of the Biennale of Luanda: Pan-African Forum for the Culture of Peace.¹⁰ Also present were João Lourenço (Angola), Sassou Nguesso (Republic of Congo), and Carlos Vila Nova (São Tomé and Príncipe). The biennale forum is a partnership between the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), the AU, and the Angolan government. It aims to promote peace and conflict resolution through cultural exchange in Africa, dialogue between generations, and the promotion of gender equality. In Luanda, Tshisekedi announced the upcoming opening in Kinshasa of the Maison de la Culture Africaine et Afrodescendante, the launching of the Pan-African Festival of Kinshasa (FESPAKIN), and the Pan-African Grand Prize of Literature. The new literature prize, currently accepting manuscripts only in French or English, awards \$30,000 to the winner. The first laureate was the Cameroonian author Osvalde Lewat for the novel *Les Aquatiques*. Of symbolic importance during the Congolese chairmanship, UNESCO announced on 14 December the inclusion of Congolese rumba music in the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

In addition to the cultural theme, the Congolese chairmanship focused on several important transversal issues. On 19 October, in Kinshasa, Tshisekedi opened the first pan-African colloquium on albinism under the theme 'African Solidarity for People with Albinism'. The two-day event was organised by the DRC ministry in charge of people living with disabilities and other vulnerable groups in collaboration with the UN Joint Human Rights Office (UNJHRO), the AU Social Affairs Commission, and the DRC presidency. Delegations from Angola, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Kenya, Mali, Niger, the Republic of Congo, South Africa, and Tanzania attended the conference. Tshisekedi underscored the need to prepare massive sensitisation and advocacy campaigns focused on the rights of people with albinism in the AU member states.

9 Reuters [Toronto], 13 September 2021.

10 *L'Angola Press Agence* [Luanda], 27 December 2021.

One month later, on 25 November, Kinshasa hosted the first pan-African conference on positive masculinity. Several heads of state were in attendance: Paul Kagame (Rwanda), Macky Sall (Senegal), Denis Sassou Nguesso (Republic of Congo), Nana Akufo-Ado (Ghana), Faure Gnassingbé Eyadéma (Togo), and Ellen Johnson Sirleaf (Liberia). AUC Chairperson Moussa Faki Mahamat attended online. The conference focused on sexual violence in conflict, early marriage and pregnancy, female genital mutilation, limited access to land and other resources, and women's participation in decision-making.

As a concluding action, the conference issued the *Kinshasa Declaration and Call for Action of the AU Heads of State on Positive Masculinity in Leadership to End Violence Against Women and Girls in Africa* (African Union 2021). The leaders committed to put in place necessary policies and measures to address the issues. They affirmed their commitment to a participatory and intergenerational approach in mobilising all stakeholders, including youth, religious and traditional leaders, civil society, African women leaders, and the private sector. The leaders called on the private sector to develop and implement policies and programmes to combat violence against women and girls while strengthening their financial empowerment and inclusion to correspond with the *AU Decade of Women's Financial and Economic Inclusion 2020–2030*.¹¹ During the conference, Tshisekedi recalled that the DRC has been affected by conflict-related sexual violence for more than two decades. He expressed hope that countries outside Africa will also adopt this declaration.

The meeting was followed on 7–8 December by a regional conference on the involvement of women in the prevention, mediation, and peacebuilding processes in Central Africa. The conference, deliberating on the establishment of a regional network of women mediators of the ECCAS with a view to better implementing *UNSC Resolution 1325* (2000), culminated with the adoption of another *Kinshasa Declaration*. It saw the participation of Congolese ministers; ministers of ECCAS member states; the former CAR interim president and co-chair of the FemWise-Africa, Catherine Samba Panza; experts; civil society organisations; academics; and religious and customary leaders from ECCAS members.

At the 35th AU Assembly (Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, 5–6 February 2022), Tshisekedi was appointed as the 'AU Champion for its Positive Masculinity Program', carrying forward the results of the Kinshasa conference. The programme intends to strengthen political commitment for ending violence

¹¹ AU Press Release [Addis Ababa], 15 June 2020.

against women and girls by supporting actions to accelerate the realisation of the rights of women and girls.

5 Other Key Issues and Dynamics

5.1 *Terrorism in Africa*

The terror threat to Africa figured prominently in Tshisekedi's incoming speech to the AU. The eradication of terrorism was also underlined prominently by the AUC chairperson as a priority in the Union's *Silencing the Guns* initiative. On 27 April, in Paris, presidents Tshisekedi and Macron discussed the strengthening of their cooperation regarding security and socioeconomic matters. During a joint press conference, Tshisekedi sought the international community's support in eradicating an Islamist group spreading terror in the eastern DRC. In March 2021, the United States had already designated the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria – Democratic Republic of the Congo (ISIS-DRC, also known as the Allied Democratic Forces, ADF) and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria – Mozambique (ISIS-Mozambique), also known as the Islamic State Central Africa Province, ISCAP), as Specially Designated Global Terrorists (SDGTs).¹² In June 2021, SADC decided to send its standby force on a military mission (SAMIM) to support Mozambique to combat terrorism and violent extremism in the Cabo Delgado province (SADC 2021). Also in June, the DRC alongside the CAR and Mauritania joined the Global Coalition against Daesh. In December of the same year, the global coalition launched the Africa Focus Group.

During his speech at the UNGA in September 2021, Tshisekedi warned that 'if the international community minimizes the danger posed by the spread of jihadism in Africa, if it does not adopt a comprehensive and effective strategy to eradicate this scourge, the wounds opened in the Saharan zone, in Central and Southern Africa, will continue to metastasize until they join to become a real threat to international peace and security'.¹³

On 22 November, a delegation from the Algiers-based African Centre for the Research and Study of Terrorism (ASCRST) visited Kinshasa. The delegation met with Prime Minister Jean-Michel Sama Lukonde Kyenge. Discussions revolved around strengthening the means to fight terrorism, including anti-terrorism

12 US Department of State Media Note [Washington DC], 10 March 2021. URL: <<https://www.state.gov/state-department-terrorist-designations-of-isis-affiliates-and-leaders-in-the-democratic-republic-of-the-congo-and-mozambique/>> (accessed: 30 June 2022).

13 Agence Congolaise de Press [Kinshasa], 22 September 2021.

laws and the *National Strategy to Fight Terrorism*. The discussions also included the situation in the eastern DRC.

In December 2021, Uganda deployed a military contingent to the eastern DRC for joint operations with the Congolese armed forces to combat the ADF. The Ugandan operation follows the earlier imposition of the state of siege in the provinces of North Kivu and Ituri since May 2021. These offensive operations against the group have not stemmed the violence against civilians. On 25 December 2021, the ADF conducted a bomb attack in Beni, North Kivu. On this occasion, the ECCAS Secretariat announced that it would focus on ways to address terror threats and violent extremism during the next meeting of the Peace and Security Council of Central Africa (COPAX), scheduled to take place in January 2022 in Brazzaville (Republic of Congo).

5.2 *Israel–Africa Relationship*

During 2021, the diplomatic relationship between Israel and the AU was high on the diplomatic agenda (see Ulf Engel, this Yearbook, chapter 2). In July 2021, the AUC chairperson announced that Israel had been formally granted observer status at the AU. Several African states in particular – South Africa, Djibouti, and Algeria – strongly opposed what they considered ‘a unilateral move’ by the commission chair. In August 2021, pressed by South Africa, SADC expressed concern and objected to the AUC chairperson’s decision. As a result, the 39th Ordinary Session of the AU Executive Council (Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, 14–15 October 2021) decided to postpone the decision regarding Israel’s observer status until the AU Assembly in February 2022.

During the summit, the AUC chairperson strongly defended his position; however, due to the major divisions, the debate was suspended, and the AU decided to kick the can to the AU Assembly in 2023. To build consensus, a committee composed of eight African Heads of State and Government was established. It includes outspoken opponents, in particular South Africa and Algeria, and supporters of the move, such as the DRC and Rwanda. This decision was strongly supported by Tshisekedi, who has taken a candid pro-Israel position. During a 2020 speech in the USA at the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), he had announced the reopening of the DRC embassy in Tel Aviv as well as the opening of an economic bureau in Jerusalem. During a state visit to Israel (24–27 October 2021), these engagements were confirmed. The DRC also reached out to Israel for security assistance in support of fighting terrorism.

5.3 *Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam Mediation and Wider Horn of Africa Dynamics*

In the run-up to the chairmanship and during the first few months following, the DRC was engaged in an intense diplomatic exchange with Egypt, Ethiopia,

and Sudan. Kinshasa received Ethiopian president Sahle-Work Zewde in January 2021. During the visit it was announced that Ethiopia would open an embassy in Kinshasa. Before going to Addis to take the helm of the AU, Tshisekedi visited Egypt for talks with the Egyptian government.

On 4 April, under the auspices of the AU, a tripartite ministerial meeting to mark the resumption of talks between Ethiopia, Egypt, and Sudan over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) project was held in Kinshasa. At the start of the meeting, Tshisekedi underscored the importance of seeking African solutions to African issues and urged the delegations to find a sustainable solution. On 8 May, he began a tour of Sudan, Egypt, and Ethiopia. In Khartoum, he had talks with the Sudanese prime minister, the minister of foreign affairs, and the chairman of the Transitional Sovereignty Council to discuss continental issues, including the GERD. No statement was made by the AU chairmanship and Sudanese officials at the end of these meetings. Tshisekedi then flew to Cairo for further talks. On 25 June, in Goma, Tshisekedi met with the US Special Envoy for the Horn of Africa. According to the Office of the President, talks revolved around the GERD, and it was noted that the discussions between the stakeholders are taking place in a peaceful atmosphere aiming at a fair resolution.

The AU-led process struggled, and Egypt and Sudan, angered by Ethiopia's decision to proceed with the filling of the dam, decided to refer the issue to the UNSC. The AU had been the lead negotiator since the 2020 South African chairmanship. In July 2021, the UN sent the case back to the AU.

In September 2022, the Congolese foreign minister visited the three countries concerned with the project to discuss measures to resume negotiations on the GERD. However, no new negotiation round was announced, and on 26 October, following the Sudanese coup d'état, Sudan was suspended from the AU. This effectively ended the immediate prospect for any talks to take place. Shortly before the coup, Egyptian and Sudanese military forces conducted major joint exercises. Despite the deadlock, Tshisekedi and President El-Sisi still had talks about the GERD negotiations on the margins of the Conference of Parties on Climate Change (COP26) in Glasgow, United Kingdom. The Congolese foreign minister was in Addis Ababa for talks with his Ethiopian counterpart and the AUC in late November 2021. Afterwards the Congolese delegation headed to Khartoum for talks with the Sudanese authorities.

In addition to the GERD dossier, Tshisekedi, alongside the AUC chairperson and the South African and Senegalese presidents, was involved in quiet diplomacy in the Ethiopian conflict, in support of former President Olusegun Obasanjo, AUC chairperson's High Representative for the Horn of Africa.

5.4 *Climate: COP26*

From 4–5 October, Jonathan Pershing, US Deputy Special Envoy for Climate, visited Kinshasa to discuss climate change and sustainable development within the framework of the DRC-US Privileged Partnership for Peace and Prosperity, plus Preservation of the Environment. On 4 October, he was received by Tshisekedi, with whom he discussed the upcoming COP26. The bilateral talks focused on cooperation on the conservation of the Congo Basin ecosystem.¹⁴

On 2 November, Tshisekedi addressed the COP26. He underscored the need to support vulnerable countries in Africa, Asia, and small island states in adapting to the impacts of climate change. The same day, in the framework of the *Central African Forest Initiative* (CAFI), Tshisekedi and UK prime minister Boris Johnson signed a 10-year agreement (2021–2031) to protect the DRC's forests.¹⁵ The agreement is expected to unlock investments worth \$500 million in its first five years, with additional funding after 2026 depending on an independent evaluation of results and the availability of funds. This partnership places 30 per cent of the Congolese territory under a protective status. Any activity incompatible with conservation objectives in the protected areas will be banned. At the same time, several industrialised countries and international organisations at the COP26 jointly declared an initial collective financing pledge of at least \$1.5 billion between 2021–2025 to support countries of the Congo Basin in order to protect the forests, its peatlands in Central Africa, as well as other carbon reserves essential for the planet.

6 Representation and Diplomacy

One of the more confusing and puzzling decisions during the Congolese chairmanship was the short-lived campaign to launch a candidature for one of the two seats up for election for the African Group (A3) in the UNSC. In February 2021, the AU Executive Council had endorsed the candidatures of Gabon and Ghana. This decision was questioned by the DRC in early May 2021. Gabon and the DRC are both in the Central African Group and the DRC maintained that the AU Assembly had decided that consultations on the matter should continue. On 7 June, the DRC announced to the UN secretary-general and the

¹⁴ See *Financial Times* [London], 25 October 2021.

¹⁵ The CAFI is a UN Trust Fund and policy dialogue platform that aims to support Cameroon, the CAR, the DRC, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, and the Republic of Congo in pursuing a low-emission development pathway that ensures economic growth and poverty reduction while protecting forests and natural resources.

UNGA that it had decided to withdraw its candidature; it would run in the 2025 UNSC election for a seat in 2026–2027.

From 15 to 18 July, Tshisekedi, toured West Africa in his capacity as AU chairperson. He travelled to Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, and Cote d'Ivoire, where he met with his counterparts to discuss the common challenges faced by African countries, notably on political, economic, and development issues, and ways to address them. After the West Africa trip followed a series of international meetings and summits. On 27 August, Tshisekedi attended the *Compact with Africa* (CWA) summit by the Group of Twenty (G20) in Berlin, Germany. After Berlin, in early September 2021, he visited Turkey for a meeting with President Recep Tayip Erdoğan. They signed three bilateral cooperation agreements. Besides bilateral issues, the two presidents also discussed the latest developments in African political, security, and economic affairs, as well as the arrangements for the 3rd Turkey-Africa Partnership Summit held later that year. During the annual meeting of the UNGA, Tshisekedi advocated four positions for Africa on the UNSC, notably two non-permanent seats and two permanent seats, with the same privileges and veto rights as other current members.

On 26 October, in Kigali, Rwanda, the vice prime minister in charge of foreign affairs, Christophe Lutundula (G7/Ensemble/USN), in his capacity as chairperson of the AU Executive Council, co-chaired the second AU-EU Ministerial Meeting, together with the high representative of the EU for foreign affairs and security policy, Josep Borrell. The meeting discussed investing in people; strengthening resilience; promoting peace, security, and governance; facilitating migration and mobility; and mobilising investments for an African structurally sustainable transformation. This second meeting took place in preparation of the next, scheduled for early 2022.

On 30 and 31 October, Tshisekedi, attended the G20 Leaders' Summit in Rome, Italy. He highlighted the negative impact of climate change on Africa's socioeconomic development and stability. Referring to the DRC's determination to contribute towards the AU Agenda 2063 through the implementation of the Grand Inga Dam project, he invited G20 members and development partners to support the project. He also encouraged the leaders to invest in renewable energy projects in Africa. Furthermore, the president proposed the creation of a new funding mechanism to implement the *Paris Agreement*, which would facilitate vulnerable countries' access to funds intended to mitigate effects of climate change.

The eighth edition of the Forum on China-African Cooperation (FOCAC) took place on 29–30 November in Dakar, Senegal, under the theme 'Deepen China-Africa Partnership and Promote Sustainable Development to Build a

China-Africa Community with a Shared Future in the New Era' (see Ulf Engel, this Yearbook, chapter 11). The DRC was represented by the vice prime minister for foreign affairs and its minister of industry.

On 18 December, in Istanbul, Turkey, President Erdoğan opened the third Turkey-Africa summit, organised under the theme 'Enhanced Partnership for Common Development and Prosperity'. In his remarks, he stressed that his country has worked to advance cooperation 'on an equal partnership and win-win basis' and 'always rejected contemptuous, peremptory and excessively orientalist perspectives towards Africa'.¹⁶ For his part, AU chairperson Tshisekedi welcomed Turkey's approach of strengthening economic and trade ties through a comprehensive development strategy consisting in technical assistance and technology transfer. During the summit, the two presidents had a bilateral meeting and later held a joint press conference along with the AUC chairperson.

On 19 December, in Brussels, Belgium, Tshisekedi attended a high-level EU-AU meeting organised by the president of the European Council, Charles Michel, as a prelude to the EU-AU summit planned for 2022. Michel noted that discussions focused on 'innovative financing solutions' for the EU-AU partnership, as well as on economic recovery, digital and green transitions. Furthermore, he stressed the importance of establishing a new EU-AU alliance based on 'prosperity, peace and common values' and noted that the EU supports a '360° approach to strengthen African health systems and vaccine production'.¹⁷ Other attendees of the meeting included the incoming AU chairperson, Senegalese president Sall, Rwandan president Kagame, the AUC chairperson, and the secretary-general of the Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie (OIF), Louise Mushikiwabo (from Rwanda).

In Kinshasa, on 10 January, Prime Minister Lukonde opened the 3rd Forum for Rural Development in Africa, under the theme 'Decentralised Planning for Rural Transformation by Capitalising on Experiences'. The three-day forum – which was attended by AU member states, experts, civil society actors, as well as local authorities – aimed inter alia at identifying evolving practices in rural transformation planning and sharing lessons learned from South-South cooperation.

¹⁶ *Horn Diplomat* [Nairobi], 18 December 2021.

¹⁷ URL: <https://twitter.com/eucopresident/status/1472600936208080907?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw> (accessed: 30 June 2022).

7 Regional Focus

During its AU chairmanship, the DRC devoted considerable diplomatic effort close to home. One area of priority was the persistent violent conflict in the eastern DRC, where the Kinshasa government has deployed a multipronged approach. In the provinces of North Kivu and Ituri, civilian authorities were suspended when a state of siege was declared by the government. Both provinces have been under direct control from Kinshasa through military and police governors. In addition to this, there has been an active security collaboration with its eastern neighbours. This has been the most fruitful with Uganda, which deployed troops to the eastern DRC for joint operations against the ADF with the Congolese army.

A second area of attention was the border conflict with Zambia. This decades-old conflict relates to the nineteenth-century colonial borders. It led to incidents between both countries' armed forces in the course of 2020. Following these latest clashes, both countries separately requested mediation by SADC. After the Zambian election in August 2021, there has been an intense diplomacy between both countries, including the signing on 30 September 2021 of a bilateral trade agreement. The newly elected Zambian president, Hakainde Hichilema, also chose the DRC as his first international visit. During the visit, both presidents agreed on the need to settle the border dispute.

In the course of 2021, the DRC and the East African Community (EAC) proceeded quickly with the DRC's 2019 bid to enter the organisation (see Omondi 2022). From 25 June to 4 July 2021, an EAC verification mission was carried out to assess the DRC's level of conformity with the EAC admission criteria. In November 2021, the EAC Council of Ministers advised those attending the summit to admit the DRC. On 22 December, the EAC held its 18th Extraordinary Summit by video conference, under the chair of Kenyan president Kenyatta, to consider the admission of the DRC. After reviewing the report of the Council of Ministers' verification visit to Kinshasa, which was deemed satisfactory, the regional presidents agreed to expedite the conclusion of negotiations. The DRC was admitted to the EAC on 29 March 2022, as its seventh member state.¹⁸ Not all went as planned though. During 2021, the DRC campaigned for the position of SADC executive secretary; however, its candidate, Faustin Luanga Mukela, was defeated by Elias M. Magosi of Botswana.

On 19 January 2022, the DRC became chair of the ECCAS. The theme of the DRC's year at the helm of the Central African REC is 'Education, Health

¹⁸ *The East African* [Nairobi], 27 March 2022.

and Culture' to support the AU's Agenda 2063. During the SADC summit on 18 August 2021, the DRC was elected to chair the organisation, starting in August 2022 (SADC 2021). It will take over from Malawi. During the DRC's mandate, Namibia will be the chair of the SADC Organ on Defence, Politics and Security Cooperation (the SADC Organ), a position currently held by South Africa. The DRC will thus chair two of the RECS it is member of during its politically sensitive pre-electoral phase.

8 Conclusions

In his annual 'State of the Nation' speech on 13 December, President Tshisekedi recalled his main achievements as chairperson of the AU. He saw these notably in terms of supporting gender equality, fighting against gender-based violence, countering climate change, and protecting indigenous peoples and people suffering from albinism. Some of these issues were effectively moved up the AU's agenda during Tshisekedi's chairmanship. Having come to power in controversial happenings, a concern of the AU, Tshisekedi professed his accession to the chairmanship of the continental organisation to ensure his legitimacy among his peers and thus consolidate his position internally.

This chairmanship also took the DRC out of the isolation created by Tshisekedi's predecessor, Kabila, who had broken ties with the international community. Tshisekedi did not want the international community, particularly the AU, to interfere in the internal affairs of the country, especially in the electoral process. However, despite the remarkable diplomatic activity, Tshisekedi did not escape the restraints inherent in the chairmanship, whose annual theme, agenda, and format are predetermined upstream and long in advance by the AUC. Thus, although the DRC is facing insecurity following armed conflicts involving several countries in the Great Lakes region, this issue has not been brought specifically to the agenda of the AU under Tshisekedi. It is the same with the multiplication of initiatives, summits, and fora and roadmaps, which leave behind a bitter taste of unfinished business.

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