

**African Union**  
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**By Asmaa Waguih**

The African Union, which was formed to succeed the Organization of African Unity on July 9, 2002 and is loosely based on the European Union, aims to promote cooperation and integration among the independent nations of Africa. It consists of 53 African nations and its headquarters are in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

It works to promote African unity on issues involving the continent, and deals with security matters and regional conflicts. Though human rights is also part of its portfolio, its record of dealing with dictators and genocidal conflicts has been mixed. As the Organization of African Unity, which was formed in the decolonization upheavals of the early 1960's, it was criticized as an ineffective "talk, no walk" organization and called a "dictators' club."

The current incarnation was conceived by Moammar el-Qaddafi, the former Libyan leader. The union has grand plans for the future that include the establishment of a central bank, with a single currency by 2023, and of a human rights court.

The chairman of the African Union is Thomas Boni Yayi, the president of Benin. In January 2012, a high-profile and bitterly fought race for chairman of the African Union Commission ended inconclusively, with neither the incumbent, Jean Ping of Gabon, nor his main challenger, South Africa's home minister, Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma, securing enough votes to win.

The narrowly contested secret ballot vote pitted Mr. Ping, who has served as chairman of the African Union Commission since 2008, against Ms. Dlamini-Zuma of South Africa, the country with sub-Saharan Africa's biggest economy and a diplomatic heavyweight.

South Africa's government had hoped that Ms. Dlamini-Zuma would help give the African Union a more effective international voice. But other major African nations, like Nigeria and Kenya, had reservations about giving so much power to South Africa, and smaller nations fretted that their interests would be neglected.

South Africa had pulled out all the stops to lobby for the candidacy of Ms. Dlamini-Zuma, a highly respected government official who is also the former wife of South Africa's president, Jacob Zuma.

But neither she nor Mr. Ping, a senior diplomat and government official from the former French colony of Gabon, secured a two-thirds majority required to win. So the organization will hold a new election at its next meeting, in June 2012 in Malawi. Under African Union rules, neither Mr. Ping nor Ms. Dlamini-Zuma will be eligible to run for election then.

### **Somalia Peacekeeping Mission**

So far, the most tangible efforts of the union have been its peacekeeping missions, and its most ambitious mission to date has been in war-torn Somalia. There, the peacekeeping force has hardened into a war-fighting machine that currently numbers about 10,000 soldiers.

Analysts say the African Union mission has done a better job of pacifying Mogadishu, Somalia's capital and a hornet's nest of Islamist militants, clan warlords, factional armies and countless freelance gunmen, than any other outside force, including 25,000 American troops in the 1990s.

Their surprising success has put the African Union in the driver's seat of an intensifying international effort to wipe out Somalia's Shabab militants. Kenya, Ethiopia, the United States, France, Djibouti, Burundi and Uganda have all jumped in to some degree against the Shabab, a brutal and wily insurgent group that is considered both a regional menace and an international threat.

The peacekeepers may soon venture into Somalia's famine-stricken hinterlands, where the Shabab have been blocking aid convoys from reaching starving people. There is also talk of bringing invading Kenyan troops, and possibly Ethiopian troops, under the green-and-white African Union flag.

But there is an uncomfortable bigger question. What will these African Union sacrifices amount to? All peacekeeping experts say the same thing: that peacekeepers are a Band-Aid on a gaping wound, a way to buy time until a political process takes hold and alleviates the causes of the conflict.

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