

# The Mashariki Today

## Raila's AU bid: A Test of Kenya's Diplomatic Acumen



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On February 15 and 16, 2025, African leaders will elect a new Chairperson of the African Union Commission (AUC). Among the leading contenders is Kenya's Raila Odinga, a seasoned statesman known for his long-standing advocacy of democracy and pan-Africanism. His candidacy represents a pivotal moment for East Africa's strategic positioning within the AU and its broader aspirations for institutional reform. Other notable candidates include H.E. Mahamoud Ali Youssouf (Djibouti) and H.E. Richard Randriamandrato (Madagascar), underscoring the election's competitiveness and strategic significance.

As the election draws close, the geopolitical landscape is rapidly evolving with shifting alliances potentially influencing the outcome particularly within the Southern African Development Community (SADC). His recent visit to Johannesburg, where he sought a meeting with South African President Cyril Ramaphosa ended without an audience,

raising questions about Pretoria's stance.<sup>1</sup> While Odinga's historic ties with Ramaphosa once suggested alignment, South Africa's foreign policy has increasingly diverged from Kenya's particularly on key multilateral issues. Pretoria has taken a strong position on Palestinian statehood, opposed Israel's AU observer status, and initiated legal action at the International Court of Justice (ICJ)—stances that contrast with Kenya's more measured diplomacy. Similarly, South Africa remains a firm backer of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR), whereas Kenya has shifted toward Morocco's claim over Western Sahara, a position Odinga has also publicly supported. These foreign policy misalignments, combined with South Africa's silence on Odinga's bid, signal that his support within SADC remains uncertain. This could shape the electoral dynamics within the AU. This commentary aims to analyze the regional and geopolitical factors shaping Odinga's candidacy and assess how his potential leadership could influence East Africa's positioning within the African Union.



East Africa as a region has an opportunity to strengthen its influence within the AU, particularly given the continental rotation principle, which suggests that the next chairperson is likely to come from the Eastern Africa region. However, Odinga's candidacy is intertwined with larger geopolitical realignments, including the role of regional blocs such as the Southern African Development Community (SADC), the East African Community (EAC), and the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). Kenya's past bid for the position in 2017, led by Ambassador Amina Mohamed, offers critical lessons in diplomatic strategy, coalition-building, and the potential pitfalls of over-relying on traditional alliances.

<sup>1</sup> <https://kenyanforeignpolicy.com/raila-odinga-snubbed-in-south-africa/>

### Key Issues Shaping the Election

#### 1. Regional Bloc Politics and Strategic Endorsements

The AUC chairpersonship is determined not solely by individual credentials but by broader regional voting dynamics. Kenya's 2017 bid demonstrated how fractured regional support and bloc politics can undermine an otherwise strong candidacy. Amina Mohamed's campaign suffered from a lack of unified backing within the EAC, as well as an inability to secure SADC's endorsement. SADC's historical tendency to vote as a bloc makes it a critical factor in Odinga's bid, yet Kenya's current engagement with SADC remains uncertain. His recent visit to Johannesburg, which failed to secure a meeting with South African President Cyril Ramaphosa, signals potential hesitancy from South Africa in formally endorsing his bid.



In contrast, Djibouti's candidate, Mahmoud Youssouf, has consolidated a significant bloc of support through his strong ties with the OIC, securing at least 28 potential votes from Islamic-majority African states. His extensive diplomatic tenure enhances his credibility among Francophone and Arab-speaking African nations, positioning him as a formidable challenger. If Kenya is to counterbalance Youssouf's advantage, it should go beyond its current EAC and select SADC endorsements, expand its outreach to Francophone West and Central African states, as well as undecided ECOWAS countries. These countries include Benin, Cape Verde, Côte d'Ivoire, The Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, and Togo.

The ongoing instability in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) adds another layer of complexity to Odinga's bid. With the DRC embroiled in escalating conflicts in the

eastern region, regional actors, including Kenya, have been actively involved in peace mediation efforts. Kenya's deployment of troops under the East African Community Regional Force (EACRF) initially positioned it as a stabilizing force in the region. However, the withdrawal of these troops and the growing influence of SADC in the DRC crisis have shifted regional dynamics. If the DRC aligns more closely with SADC rather than the EAC, it may weaken Odinga's support base, given that Kinshasa wields significant influence within the AU's Central African bloc. In addition, ongoing tensions between the DRC and Rwanda which is a key Kenyan ally, may further complicate Odinga's diplomatic calculus in securing votes from Central Africa.

### **2. Economic Integration and Infrastructure Development**

A key pillar of Odinga's candidacy is his emphasis on economic integration, trade facilitation, and infrastructure-led growth. His tenure as AU High Representative for Infrastructure Development (2018–2021) saw him champion major projects such as the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), the Programme for Infrastructure Development in Africa (PIDA), and the Lamu Port-South Sudan-Ethiopia-Transport (LAPSSET) Corridor. If elected, Odinga would likely advocate for greater investment in transnational infrastructure projects to enhance connectivity across African economies.



However, the challenge remains in translating this vision into actionable policies within the AU framework. Infrastructure development requires strong financial backing and institutional coordination, both of which have historically been constrained by limited AU resources and competing national interests. Furthermore, non-tariff barriers continue to hinder intra-African trade, necessitating strong leadership to harmonize trade policies across regional economic blocs. Whether Odinga can successfully

navigate these complexities and secure consensus on economic integration policies will be central to his effectiveness as AUC chair.

### 3. Security and Peacebuilding

The AU's role in conflict management remains one of its most critical functions, particularly in East Africa where persistent instability in Somalia, Ethiopia, and Sudan threatens regional security. Odinga's mediation experience, including his role in Kenya's 2008 post-election crisis and the AU-led intervention in Côte d'Ivoire (2010–2011), provides him with credibility as a potential conflict-resolution leader. His candidacy offers an opportunity for East Africa to assert greater influence over AU peacekeeping initiatives and shape the future of the African Standby Force (ASF).



However, the effectiveness of AU-led peacekeeping efforts has often been undermined by inconsistent member-state commitments and financial constraints. While Odinga's leadership could push for reforms in AU peacekeeping frameworks, his ability to generate widespread support for these initiatives remains uncertain, particularly given competing security priorities in West and Central Africa.

### 4. Climate Diplomacy and Africa's Green Agenda

With climate change disproportionately affecting East Africa, Odinga has placed climate action and sustainable development at the core of his campaign agenda. His platform aligns with initiatives such as the Africa Adaptation Acceleration Program (AAP), renewable energy projects, and climate resilience funding. Kenya's role as host to the

United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) in Nairobi provides Odinga with a strong platform to advocate for climate action within the AU.

However, climate diplomacy within the AU has been fragmented, with member states often prioritizing short-term economic interests over long-term environmental policies. Odinga's leadership could help consolidate a stronger AU position on climate adaptation and mitigation, but it would require extensive coordination with African states that remain heavily reliant on fossil fuels and extractive industries.



### Recommendations

To enhance the likelihood of Raila Odinga's success, Kenya should adopt a multi-layered diplomatic strategy that moves beyond traditional alliances and secures key swing votes. While Odinga has already garnered endorsements from several East African and Southern African nations, further consolidation of support across regional blocs will be critical in determining the election outcome.

Kenya should focus on strengthening its engagement with the Southern African Development Community (SADC), given its historical tendency to vote as a bloc. While some SADC members, such as Malawi, Zambia, and Zimbabwe, have indicated support for Odinga, the absence of a formal endorsement from South Africa remains a major diplomatic gap. South Africa's influence within the bloc makes its backing essential, and Kenya should engage Pretoria diplomatically to secure a definitive commitment. Additionally, outreach to Angola, Mozambique, and Botswana—whose positions remain undecided—should be prioritized to ensure broader regional alignment in Kenya's favor.



Beyond SADC, Kenya should expand its engagement outside the East African Community (EAC) to avoid over-reliance on a bloc that proved unreliable in 2017. In the last AUC election, Kenya's assumption of full EAC backing was undermined by shifting allegiances from Uganda, Tanzania, and Burundi, demonstrating the need for a more diversified approach. To counterbalance this, Kenya should strengthen bilateral ties with key ECOWAS states, particularly Nigeria, Ghana, and Senegal, which have historically played decisive roles in AU elections. A stronger presence in West Africa could help counter balance Djibouti's candidate, Mahamoud Youssouf, who has secured a significant bloc of support from the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC).

Odinga's campaign messaging should also be refined to focus on three or four core deliverables that align with Africa's immediate priorities. His eight-pillar manifesto, while comprehensive, may risk appearing overly ambitious and impractical within the tenure of an AUC chairperson. A strategic emphasis on economic integration, peace and security, and climate action would enhance his appeal across diverse regional blocs while reinforcing his credibility as a pragmatic leader. Additionally, Odinga should highlight his commitment to youth inclusion and leadership succession within the AU.

Given the high probability of a multi-round voting process, Kenya should prepare for a scenario in which alliances shift dynamically between rounds. The 2017 election demonstrated that initial frontrunners can lose ground as negotiations intensify in later voting rounds. Kenya's diplomatic team should secure binding commitments from early supporters while simultaneously working to engage undecided nations throughout the election process. A structured fallback strategy will be critical in maintaining coalition stability and adapting to shifting geopolitical interests.



### Conclusion

Raila Odinga's bid for the AUC chairpersonship represents a significant opportunity for East Africa to assert greater influence in shaping AU policies on trade, security, and climate diplomacy. However, his success hinges on Kenya's ability to navigate the complex regional and geopolitical dynamics that have historically shaped AU elections.

While Odinga's extensive leadership experience and commitment to pan-Africanism make him a formidable candidate, the presence of strong competitors, particularly Djibouti's Mahamoud Youssouf, underscores the need for a calculated and well-coordinated diplomatic approach. Kenya's challenge remains in securing a diverse coalition of support beyond its traditional EAC stronghold and ensuring that bloc politics, particularly within SADC and ECOWAS align in its favor.

Ultimately, the success of Odinga's candidacy will be a test of Kenya's diplomatic agility, regional alliance-building, and ability to translate vision into actionable leadership. Whether he secures the position or not, this election will serve as a critical case study in the evolving geopolitics of the African Union and the role of East Africa within it.

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