

AFRICAN CONTROVERSIES CONTROVERSES AFRICAINES

N°01

ON OLIGARCHIES AND THE IGNOMINY OF TOXIC PETITIONING AT PAN AFRICAN ORGANISATIONS

Divine **FUH**

TMI
THE MUNTU INSTITUTE
AFRICAN HUMANITIES
AND SOCIAL SCIENCES



Africa must find more constructive ways of engaging its problems and those that it considers problematic. But toxic petitioning meant to decapitate young talents is not the way to do it. Promising young leaders need support, especially from elders who most often claim to appreciate the strategic importance of Pan African institutions in influencing and shaping the continent's development trajectory. As such, they may also understand how fierce contestation for leading these continental institutions often is.

As a teenager growing up in a small village in Cameroon, one often experienced how a group of elites stood in the way of progress by regularly petitioning the authorities to either dismiss, transfer, or recall a new appointee or rivals, coming from outside their familiar circles, ostensibly because they did not consider the victim 'indigene enough' to be legitimate. This cabal terrorised and held the entire community hostage to the point where almost every development and progressive initiative came to a standstill. Most progressive minds became worried about the sabotage techniques of this vicious group, who were involved in and had captured almost every space. Together with my mates, we playfully

named this group of simply pathetic people as 'the petitioners'. In the era of Computers, many of the petitions were typed by one of our community 'Big Brother' who owned a documentation/computer shop, frequently right into the wee hours of the night. The petitioners were dedicated, invested, committed, and had transformed it as an art, a way of life. They were so good at it so much so that at some point in the community, roads, schools, churches, hospitals, government offices, etc. had been objects of a petition such that almost nothing was working; and especially after every appointed qualified and competent person had left for fear of reprisals.

This week I came across another petition written and signed by some of the most respectable intellectuals on the continent - in the name of and on behalf of the prestigious organisations they head, against one of their peers, or 'let's say one of 'ours,' at another respectable organisation on the continent. The open letter, signed by a record number of over 64 groups and individuals "welcome[d] the withdrawal, by the UN Secretary-General, of the appointment of Mr Matt Hancock, former UK Secretary of State for Health and Social Care and MP for West Suffolk as

Special Representative for Financial Innovation and Climate Change of the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA).” This “grave error of judgement by Ms. Vera Songwe [Executive Secretary of the UNECA] and the rescinding of the appointment” was qualified by the signatories, and rightly so, as “disgraceful to and disdainful of all Africans.” This disdainfulness is further driven home when one considers the many prominent Africans who qualify for and could have taken up or offered the position. This is made worse by the fact that the former British Health Minister Mr Matt Hancock spearheaded what many health experts consider as one of the most disastrous responses to the Covid-19 pandemic, accentuated by the fact that he was pushed to resign because he violated the same strict prevention regulations that were imposed on the country.

As the letter alludes, it is not the first time UNECA’s Executive Secretary, Ms Vera Songwe, is mired in controversy. In 2019 and 2020, open letters and petitions issues by employees indicted her leadership style and vision, especially what they interpreted as favouritism in hires, mismanagement/corruption and in privileging

networking with extra-continental institutions over other institutions on the continent, and also what the petition considers to be an outright disregard for the African Union and the long historical relations between UNECA and the African Union. The petition notes that “Unfortunately, it is the latest in a series of acts that show Ms Songwe’s lack of proper understanding of or regard for the history of the UNECA and a thinly veiled contempt for African institutions.” Furthermore, the signatories point out that “It fits into a history of incidents and acts involving Ms Songwe which have degraded the UNECA’s role, developed and advanced by previous Executive Secretaries, as an institution serving African interests.” At UNECA, this practice of checking and balancing the work of managers through petitions appears to be a tradition, as experienced by previous Executive Secretaries.

Beyond UNECA, it would appear, it is the *mode de vie* at many, if not all, Pan African and continental organisations. Public and live-streamed factional leadership squabbles between delegates at the eminent Pan African Parliament that is meant to be the epitome of African unity demonstrates just how complex the challenge of privileging

African wellbeing is in these spaces where individual career trajectories and ambitions appear to trump everything else. At the African Peer Review Mechanism, it is even more ironic that petitioning and internal squabbles have primarily stood in the way of the institution effectively playing its role to advance democratic norms and standards and an instrument to monitor and review the socio-economic progress of African countries. It would appear that almost all AU offices and institutions are affected/infected.

Recently, similar internal tensions at the *African Academy of Sciences (AAS)* have led to more than half of its staff leaving, after key international funders, including the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the UK government, and the UK charity, Wellcome withdrew from a flagship funding partnership. According to *Nature*, the situation did not need to happen and could have been avoided through better stakeholder engagement. After suspending the AAS director, Nelson Torto in 2020 to undertake a forensic audit into allegations that staff salaries and benefits had been inflated without proper procedure, a group of AAS Fellows wrote to funders of the AESA

initiative and other stakeholders in the funding platform, including the African Union's development body, AUDA-NEPAD, expressing "deep concern" about the governance of the AAS. In 2020 the re-appointment of Dr. Akinwumi Adesina for a second term as President of the African Development Bank Group was mired in controversy following governance concerns and allegations of maladministration. Even after having been cleared of any wrongdoing by the Bank's Ethics Committee following a commissioned independent investigation, petitioning the process itself raised further doubts on the institution's integrity.

At the turn of the Millenium, Achille Mbembe decided to leave as Executive Secretary of CODESRIA and pursue other creative intellectual endeavours resulting in the setting up of WISER at Wits University. During his tenure, the organisation grew its budget and expanded its funding base amid a tumultuous structural adjustment crisis, improved longstanding staffing welfare/benefits, sent off staff to training, enlarged the disciplinary base of the organisation, established international collaborations, modernised the publications

programme to internationally disseminate publications, introduced new critical debates and renewed the council's intellectual agenda. However, his early departure was mired in conspiratorial petitioning alledging "governance concerns" following an audit by Ernst and Young. Akin to the current mobilisation against Vera Songwe, the vicious public shaming, particularly by supposed elders, activated long-lasting rifts in the organisation that almost ruined its future/legacy. Partly instigated by what is known as 'The Tambacounda emails', snippets of this toxic castigation couched as critiques are contained in some of the brilliant responses to Mbembe's (2004) *African Modes of Self-Writing*. In the case of Mbembe, just like with Songwe, and many of the cases cited above, the techniques and methodologies of sabotage appear to be similar.

Ironically, this piece was written in the context of the conservatism that he encountered then in the organisation, and the instrumentalisation of 'panafricanism' as a mask for rent-seeking practices and the promotion of the persistent gerontocratic ethos that has captured and held many continental-level institutions hostage. Mbembe's fight was about how we (Africa) should

posit ourselves in relation to the world, in particular how we respond to the unfolding geopolitics of knowledge during that period. Unfortunately, rather than an intellectual dispute, responses to the article also degenerated to vicious accusations of Mbembe being un-African, post-modern, too French, bad administrator/manager, etc.

In the case of Mbembe just like with Vera and many of the previous cases I have cited above, the techniques and methodologies of sabotage are similar, as well as the vocabulary of condemnation. In the attacks against Vera Songwe, the tropes employed are very similar, faulting her for coming from those institutions they loathe (World Bank, Brookings Institute etc), for being too cosmopolitan and obsessed with foreign or neoliberal capital even though themselves mainly dependent on foreign funding.

Spying, reporting on and undercutting colleagues, particularly aspiring cadets, especially by oligarchs, appears to be the operating style in these old-fashioned bureaucracies. That patronage, fear of reprisals/counter-reprisals, surveillance/spying, sabotage/ostracising,

petitioning and suspicion, as observed, remains and undermine the intellectual life of CODESRIA. During my tenure as Head of Publications and Dissemination at CODESRIA, there was a sense that the critical mandate and work of the organisation was constantly held hostage by toxic politics of sabotage or the fear of it that overshadowed the everyday life of its intellectual agenda.

Petitions are valuable disruptive tools for complaint collectives, and even when not immediately addressed by authorities, initiate a process of reflection. In many instances, and thankfully so, petitions are the only powerful weapons of the weak, especially in institutions where the authority of bureaucratic elites is absolute. As Jabulani Sikhakhane demonstrates, petitioning is “politics from below”, and during the colonial era was used for resistance, complaints, to seek redress, to interact with authorities despite the distance, and to inform authorities about the needs of ordinary subjects. In a patriarchal context, “petition writing granted women agency and opportunities for far greater female assertiveness and civic engagement.”

Nevertheless, especially when driven by privileged elites, petitions can also serve strategically as a surveillance tool to destroy and undermine the leadership of those persons seen not to be deserving of or insider enough to belong or occupy particular leadership roles/positions. This destructive politics of undermining is at the centre of a gerontocratic machine in the DNA of many continental institutions/organisations. It is part of a toxic patriarchal and often misogynistic politics of Babarisation that treats everyone else as juvenile and incompetent if not authorised, especially if they have not paid allegiance to or genuflected in front of Babas. Also, because once endorsed by Baba, one is eternally favoured, granted privileged access to mentorship, protected, supported and expected to make gaffes without extraordinarily punitive consequences. After all, as West Africans emphasise, “if a child washes his hands, he can now eat with elders/kings”, and “What an old man can see sitting down, a young man cannot see even if standing on top of the tallest tree.” The idea here is for cadets or social subordinates to remain the subject of traditional hierarchies and simultaneously be excluded from the lowest levels of the pyramidal hierarchies.

For generations, young men – cadets – have been the beneficiaries of this public stoning and generous violence of pruning by Babas. Scholars observe that in the Cameroon Grassfields, like in many parts of the African continent, a practice exists in which those denied toeholds on the ladder of elite hierarchies are ‘infantilised’ and systematically represented as children. Despite having come of age through physical development and other social/political accomplishments, they are treated by elders as toddlers and objects without any valuable life essence, mainly to be seen rather than heard, and only fit to be acted upon rather than acting. Toxic petitioning, particularly by privileged gerontocrats and elites against budding cadets they should nurture, operates as a cropping mechanism to decapitate. It thus is not surprising that Vera Songwe is reproached for aspiring to the power circles of the IMF and World Bank, albeit controversial institutions, a request that she curbs her enthusiasm and ambition “to cement her links in these power circles.” As a West African proverb points out: “if you rise too early, the due of life will soak you.”

Today, this trimming practice is core to the operational logic of many public institutions,

particularly at the continental level, where membership in and loyalty to an oligarchy is essential for survival. As women occupy these spaces and assert themselves in boardrooms, they increasingly become the target of such violence, open shaming and stalking. This violence, or another form of wizardry, is from both patriarchs and matriarchs who employ the same punitive oligarchical logic to drown aspiring cadets. Scholars of women in leadership positions show from their research that women such as Vera Songwe are often perceived as too emotional to handle such leadership positions. Hence, they are prone to errors of judgement, as pointed out in the most recent petition against her. Amanda Gouws shows how women leaders must cope with stereotypical ideas about themselves as incompetent and ignorant in politics and government. Even worse are the very public and visible political incidents – like the current petition against Vera Songwe – frequently deployed to undermine their authority and the entire feminist agenda in these spaces.

In her study, Amanda Gouws identifies the lack of support from the women's movement as one of the persistent barriers to women's leadership. Gender

norms in many contexts that emphasise women's primary role as wives, mothers and daughters mean that even when they are amongst the few women in leadership at the continental level, they are systematically bracketed by patriarchy as ignorant and incompetent. Gouws shows how in politics and government, women leaders must cope with stereotypical ideas about themselves as incompetent and ignorant. Even worse, are the very public and visible political incidents – like the current petition against Vera Songwe – frequently deployed to undermine their authority and the entire feminist agenda in these spaces.

In March 2021, a WTO boss Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, the first woman and African to hold the position, former Finance Minister of Nigeria and former Managing Director of the World Bank, was described by the headline of three Swiss newspapers as: "This grandmother will become the boss of the WTO", provoking complaints to the newspapers and an apology from the Media company. With such ideologies, women leaders have almost no chance to succeed.

But who is Vera Songwe? In April 2017, UN Secretary-General António Guterres appointed

Cameroon-born Vera Songwe to succeed Guinea-Bissau's Carlos Lopes as the ninth Executive Secretary of the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA), making her the first woman to lead the institution in its sixty years history. She took up the position in August 2017. A high-flying technocrat, Ms Songwe brought a longstanding track record of knowledge production, delivering quality policy advisory services and results-oriented implementation in the region, coupled with a demonstrated strong and clear strategic vision for the continent. Before her appointment, she served as the former Regional Director for West and Central Africa for the International Finance Corporation (IFC), which she took up in 2015. She was previously World Bank Country Director for Senegal, Cape Verde, The Gambia, Guinea Bissau and Mauritania (2012 - 2015), Adviser to the Managing Director of the World Bank for Africa, Europe and Central Asia and South Asia Regions (2008-2011) and Lead Country Sector Coordinator (2005-2008). Since 2011, she has been a Non-resident Senior Fellow of The Brookings Institute: Global Development and Africa Growth Initiative and was part of the World Bank Group team that raised an impressive US\$49.3 billion in concessional financing for low-

income countries as part of the International Development Association's (IDA) 16th replenishment.

In her formative years, Ms Songwe was educated at the prestigious Our Lady of Lourdes Catholic College in her hometown of Bamenda, by Catholic Nuns, before obtaining a Bachelor of Arts degree in Economics and Political Science at the University of Michigan, USA. She obtained a Master of Arts in Law and Economics, a *Diplôme D'Etudes Approfondies* in Economic Sciences and Politics from the *Université Catholique de Louvain*, and then a PhD in Mathematical Economics, from the *Center for Operations Research and Econometrics* in Belgium. She was recently listed as one of Africa's 50 most influential women by Forbes and named one of the '100 Most Influential Africans' by *Jeune Afrique* in 2019. In 2017, *New African Magazine* listed her as one of the '100 Most Influential Africans' and the *Financial Times* named her one of the '25 Africans to watch' in 2015, the same year in which the *African Business Review* described her as one of the "Top 10 Female Business Leaders in Africa." This was the same year she collaborated with the *Tony Elumelu Entrepreneurship Programme* that pledged \$100

million for African start-up companies. *The Institut Choiseul for International Politics and Geoeconomics* selected her in 2014 amongst the “African leaders of tomorrow”. In 2013 she was listed by *Forbes* as one of the “20 Young Power Women in Africa”.

Vera Songwe has written extensively on economic and development issues, including debt, infrastructure development, and fiscal governance. She is well-published and regularly contributes to development debates across various platforms worldwide, including the *Financial Times*. Her work on policy issues is well acclaimed, and she is credited for assisting in fast-tracking the African Continental Free Trade Area Agreement’s ratification by over 20 countries. At the UNECA, her reforms have focused on “ideas for a prosperous Africa”, bringing critical macroeconomic stability, development finance, private sector growth, poverty, inequality, digital transformation, trade, and competitiveness to the fore.

Under her leadership, the ECA was the first to call for the Debt Service Suspension Initiative for Africa, which made it possible to put an estimated

10 billion dollars immediately in the budgets of African finance ministers during this Covid-19 pandemic. She worked tirelessly on an extension that added another 5 billion dollars to Finance Ministers. The ECA was the first institution to call for the issuance of Special Drawing Rights that delivered over 33.6 billion dollars in new fiscal and reserve resources to African countries. She has worked tirelessly with many others across the continent and globally on the procurement of vaccines for the African continent. These collective efforts resulted in, for instance, the acquisition of 400 million doses of JnJ, the only sure vaccine we have today on the continent.

The drafting of the *African Digital Strategy* in support of the AfCFTA by the ECA Digital Center of Excellence and the AU is a significant breakthrough. Today, the ECA is one of the institutions leading the charge to keep gas as a transition fuel and currently fighting for a carbon price. She launched a billion-dollar clean energy initiative to improve governance of the energy sector, crowd in finance and support climate changes, and improved census procedures on the continent to improve Africa's data capabilities. She designed the training of over 15,000 young girls

across the continent in Artificial intelligence, robotics IoT, games and animation; and opened an artificial intelligence centre in the University of Congo Brazzaville.

Public shaming through toxic petitioning, if not well managed, apart from its intention to absolute ridicule, crop and destroy particular personalities, also has the unintended consequence of damaging institutions badly in need of support, mentorship and good leadership. For years we have clamoured to introduce 'new blood', women, and disruptors with radically new ideas/approaches into organisations and institutions, many of which have long been hostage to patronage networks and oligarchies. Our responsibility, especially those of elders and successful elites, is to support, mentor, and seek to guide those emerging role models entrusted with the responsibility to build institutions and train the trainers. However, as *Nature* observes about how to resolve the African Academy of Sciences debacle, we must stay engaged and seek to build rather than abandon and destroy. As it points out, "Good leadership involves learning from failure and accepting responsibility for mistakes." The troubling decision to appoint the problematic former UK Secretary of

State for Health and Social Care Mr Matt Hancock as Special Representative for Financial Innovation and Climate Change of the UN Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) has been rescinded. It is time to learn lessons, re-engage and continue the critical building work that this continent so urgently demands.

Nevertheless, to do that effectively and productively, we must find more constructive ways to engage each other, articulate and deal with our problems and those that we find or define as problematic, even/especially when they are not part of our oligarchies or networks. There is so much work to do, and we have already lost much time, energy and initiatives to ego wars. So much work, so little time, and the stakes for the continent remain high. Africa, particularly Pan Africanism, is everyone's responsibility and not the monopoly of a few, and everyone/every effort needs to be counted and supported to succeed.

As we inherit and transmit to the next generation, we must ensure that some of the destructive and generally misogynist praxes introduced and perfected during the colonial era are abandoned

in favour of more constructive approaches to improving leadership that allow continental institutions to breathe and flourish. Our emancipation requires a new and more caring politics of solidarity. Caring is arduous work, emotional and uncompensated, as evidenced in women and feminist struggles. Silencing, shaming, and unwarranted public tearing down of people are not how to do it. It is impressive to see the number of personalities and heads of institutions mandated by their boards to join the petition against UNECA boss Vera Songwe. What is sad is the amount of knowledge and experience accumulated by that group of people through their work in Pan African organisations/institutions across the continent and globally. In a continent of interdependency and conviviality, no one leads alone. Good leadership is that which considers itself incomplete. It is never too late for this collective of intellectual elders, and all of us, despite our disagreements, to demonstrate even higher leadership by coalescing and putting their ideas in support of their own unless the purpose of the entire exercise is simply malice by an oligarchy aimed at replaying some of the conspiratorial political scripts that this continent must decolonise.

Pan African organisations have been at the forefront of training the next generation of African leaders. It would be a travesty if they end their lives as undertakers of burgeoning young talents. To reduce oneself to petitioning is to under employ one's talent and education for a continent that needs every single hand on the deck. Pan Africanism should be an act of generosity, solidarity, caring, handholding and commitment to togetherness beyond doubt and duplicity.

AFRICAN CONTROVERSIES CONTROVERSES AFRICAINES

Illustration de couverture : © Denise Ndzakou, 2015

**AN ONLINE PUBLICATION ON DEBATES
AND CONTROVERSIES IN AFRICA AND
DIASPORAS**



<https://muntu-institute.africa/>