

Kenya's Geopolitics

Raila Odinga's Loss at the African Union Commission's Chairman Election

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At a Glance

- › Former Kenyan Prime Minister Raila Odinga's loss in the 2025 African Union Commission (AUC) chairmanship election, despite widespread endorsements, underscores the complexities of African geopolitics and regional alliances
- › Kenya's failure to secure the AUC chair highlights the interplay of regional blocs, linguistic affiliations, and diplomatic manoeuvrings
- › The election's outcome reshapes Kenya's internal political landscape. Odinga's return to domestic politics could challenge President Ruto's administration, potentially rekindling opposition momentum and altering party alliances within the Azimio coalition and the Orange Democratic Movement (ODM)

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Introduction

Former Prime Minister of Kenya, Raila Odinga, has lost the African Union Commission (AUC) chairperson election held on Saturday, 15th of February 2025, in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia - this despite securing multiple endorsements from several African Nations and heads of states. Odinga had received endorsements from several African nations across different regions; securing public support from at least 28 African nations with 19 heads of states backing his candidacy¹.

The chairman position, which plays a key role in shaping the AU's policies and global representation, will instead be taken up by Djibouti's foreign Affairs Minister Mahmoud Ali Youssouf. Youssouf, who received the requisite 33 votes in the 7th round of voting in which he contested alone, will be succeeding Chadian Moussa Faki Mahamat and marking a significant shift in the leadership dynamic.

Odinga's candidacy for the position was unexpected, given his long-standing role as the de facto leader of Kenya's opposition coalition, Azimio la Umoja, and head of its largest party, the Orange Democratic Movement (ODM). The election gained national attention when President William Ruto's government publicly endorsed and heavily funded Odinga's bid in July 2024.

This endorsement came amid widespread youth-led protests amid the Finance Bill 2023, with demonstrators accusing the government of economic mismanagement. Ironically, Odinga had previously led similar protests against Ruto's administration, citing electoral fraud and the rising cost of living. The unexpected alliance between Ruto and Odinga led to ODM members joining the government, a move widely perceived as a betrayal—particularly by the Gen Z movement, which had been at the forefront of the protests.

Odinga's Political Legacy

Odinga brings well-established experience and influence on governance within Kenya, East African and within the pan-Africanist political environment which led to his increased visibility within the AU chairperson elections. As a veteran politician spanning approximately 40 years, he has unsuccessfully led five elections for the presidential campaign, previously served as Member of Parliament, held several ministerial positions and served as the Prime Minister of Kenya from 2008 to 2013. Notably, within the AU, he has held one official position, being appointed High Representative for Infrastructure Development at the African Union Commission in 2018, contributing to his pan-African credentials and a key factor in his current bid. While tasked with spearheading and advancing cross-continental infrastructural development such as implementing the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) under Agenda 2063, he was removed from his post in 2022 after "continued politicking"².

Kenya's Failed Bid – Regional Politics and Diplomacy

The AUC chairperson is elected by the AU Assembly, consisting of heads of state and government, for a four-year term, renewable once. The election process occurs alongside that of the deputy chair and requires a two-thirds majority consensus among member states. Since the AU's reconstitution in 2002, the chairperson position has been held by representatives from Western, Southern, and Central Africa. Following the AU's regional rotation principle, the next chairperson was expected to be nominated and awarded from Eastern Africa.

Several factors contributed to the decision not to elect a Kenyan candidate this year, namely the interplay of regional alliances and linguistic affiliations within the Francophone and Southern Africa Development Community (SADC) region³. Secondly, perceived diplomatic blunders, especially over Ruto's contested stance on the Palestinian-Israel conflict as well as Rwanda's role in Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), led to the election of a candidate from Djibouti over Kenya. Financial constraints, especially the lack of transparency in the funding of Odinga's bid led to public scrutiny and legal challenges, including a petition seeking to block the government from using public funds for his campaign⁴. Reports indicate that his campaign encountered a "serious money squeeze," which limited his ability to conduct extensive lobbying across all 55 AU member states⁵. Furthermore, structural arguments such as his advanced age⁶, and his political positioning in the opposition within Kenya, may have additionally heavily influenced the outcome.

A Blow to Kenya's Diplomatic Strategy

Odinga's defeat is a major setback for Kenya's foreign policy ambitions; a win would have positioned Kenya as a key power broker in continental affairs, reinforcing its already established influence in regional diplomacy and international forums such as the G20 and United Nations as well as a major hub within East Africa. With Odinga out of the race, Kenya will need to recalibrate its approach to AU engagement. The loss raises questions about the effectiveness of Kenya's diplomatic attempts and whether alternative approaches, such as reinforcing stronger regional alliances with SADC or institutionalizing long term AU lobbying could have yielded a different outcome.

As this is Kenya's second attempt to pursue the position unsuccessfully, there is need to reevaluate its past strategies. Former Foreign Affairs Cabinet Secretary Amina Mohamed contested for Chairperson in 2017, losing to the Chadian foreign minister, after an intense campaign which cost Kenya almost 3.5 million USD. Her major setback is claimed to be a result of the loss of support from neighbouring East African Countries such as Uganda, Djibouti and Burundi⁷.

Domestic Implications for Kenya

Despite his loss, Odinga remains an influential figure in Kenya. The loss is expected to heavily shift the political landscape, with him potentially playing a more active role in domestic politics. Especially for incumbent President Dr. William Ruto, this unexpected outcome presents a major political challenge. His administration's full backing of Odinga's bid means the failure could be perceived as a diplomatic miscalculation. With Odinga now back in Kenyan political sphere, there is now an increase of the chance of him posing another threat for the next presidential election in 2027 either by vying himself or becoming a kingmaker for those outside government.

Within the ODM Party, Odinga may now reverse his temporary handover of the leadership to Kisumu Governor, Anyang' Nyong'o. Odinga's potential return to active leadership of the ODM Party would likely reshape opposition politics, strengthening ODM's influence in national affairs and possibly altering alliances within the Azimio coalition and reignite political rivalry with Ruto's administration.

In the meantime, the loss has raised heavy public sentiment. Within hours of the announcement, former allies of Odinga have begun to threaten to push for the withdrawal of Kenya from the AU; Homa Bay Town MP Kaluma claimed he will petition the withdrawal of the EAC from the African Union, rethinking their commitments to the AU⁸. This however seems to be more political rhetoric to express the frustrations rather than serious and realist policy proposals. Amongst the public, especially on social media, the reactions were mixed, ranging from celebrating his loss to critiquing the governments lobbying strategy. Some Kenyans welcomed the loss urging Odinga to come back and take up the opposition role, which he has effectively executed before. However, members of parliament from Odinga' and Ruto's parties have castigated such celebrations deeming them unpatriotic.

Nonetheless, Ruto has the possibility to distance himself from the failure by claiming he has given him a fair chance by endorsing his nominations. It is also possible that the partnership with the Odinga party might continue, with the latter continuing to benefit from government favors. So far there are reports of deal cutting between Odinga and Ruto with regards to parliamentary committees as well as calls of power sharing by both camps.

Conclusion

Essentially, Raila Odinga's defeat in the bid for the AUC chairmanship highlights the significant role regional blocs, national foreign policies, and domestic political dynamics play in African leadership elections. The SADC's support for competing candidates, combined with Ruto's disputed foreign policy decisions, weakened Odinga's chances. This loss also intensified skepticism over the partnership between Odinga and Ruto, impacting Kenya's political dynamic. Despite the setback, Odinga's

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political continued influence in African affairs suggest that this defeat is not the end of his journey in shaping continental and national leadership.

- ¹ Kenya Insights. 10th February 2025. List of Countries That Have Endorsed Raila's AU Chairperson Bid. <https://kenyainsights.com/list-of-countries-that-have-endorsed-railas-auc-chairperson-bid/>
- ² The East African. February 26th, 2023. He had it coming: Intrigues that coast Kenya's Rail top AU job. <https://www.theeastafrican.co.ke/tea/news/east-africa/intrigues-that-cost-kenya-s-raila-top-au-job-4136974>
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- ⁵ The Citizen. 12th November 2024. Raila Odinga's AUC Campaigns hit by Crunch. <https://www.the-citizen.co.tz/tanzania/news/east-africa-news/raila-odinga-s-auc-campaigns-hit-by-cash-crunch-4820330#story>
- ⁶ Maina, Mwangi. POLICY 1 (2024). Implications of President Ruto's Endorsement of Raila Odinga for the African Union Commission Chairmanship. KFP POLICY BRIEF 001. <https://kenyanforeign-policy.com/Documents/Policy%20Briefs/KFP%20POLICY%20BRIEF%20001.pdf>
- ⁷ The Standard, 2017. 16th February 2025. Details of how Amina Mohamed lost African Union Commission election. <https://www.standardmedia.co.ke/article/2001227877/details-of-how-amina-mohamed-lost-african-union-commission-election>
- ⁸ The Star Official Website. 16th February 2025. Raila Allies threaten to push for Kenya's AU exit. <https://www.the-star.co.ke/news/2025-02-16-raila-allies-threaten-to-push-for-kenyas-au-exit>

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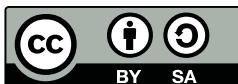
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