

Nepad vision a victim of African realpolitik

Political peer review is a must if initiative for continent is to maintain credibility

THE New Partnership for Africa's Development (Nepad) has fallen victim to the realities of African politics. Yesterday's confirmation by President Thabo Mbeki that Deputy Foreign Minister Aziz Pahad was correct in saying peer review is to be confined to economic and corporate governance issues, amounts to a backward leap from one of Nepad's original plans.

Mbeki said the political governance would be monitored by African Union (AU) watchdog bodies such as the Commission for People's and Human Rights. In addition, Pahad said earlier this week that political governance would be looked after by bodies such as the soon-to-be-established African parliament, court of justice, and the political and security council.

This would hardly amount to independent peer review, and could mark a reinforcement of African politics as usual.

Nepad aims to break with the past. It promises a credible mechanism for comprehensive peer review the scrutiny of the performance of one state by others. The very act of volunteering for a review will put pressure on those that don't. Peer review based on reports that are insulated from government interference was the promise and hope of Nepad.

The Nepad implementation committee meeting in the Nigerian capital of Abuja this weekend will be under pressure to show progress on the peer review mechanism as the first practical step of the initiative. Failure to come up with a political mechanism will be a glaring gap.

Economic peer review cannot be uniquely African, but is rather a technical product. And with reports done by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank, African Development Bank, and United Nations Economic Commission for Africa it is unlikely that a great deal of value can be added.

Comprehensive peer review is important because it would show collective political will to address problems. The excuse given by insiders for a failure to address violations in human rights from Algeria to Zimbabwe has been that the Nepad peer review mechanism was not in place. For Nepad to become larger than a set of ambitions for individual countries, it needs collective pressure on those violating its basic tenets, and that can best begin with independent political peer review.

The African peer review mechanism does provide for pressure in that countries after a period of "constructive dialogue" can take "appropriate measures". This too is at risk following Mbeki's statement.

When Pahad said the proposed peer review under Nepad would be confined to economic and corporate governance issues, and would not cover political matters, it reflected what many countries on the continent have wanted despite a high sounding heads of state declaration.

African governments were aware that countries adhering to Nepad principles would be given greater aid under "enhanced partnerships" by the Group of Eight, Pahad said. That is the reality, but peer review was meant to create African ownership of the politics of reform.

The exclusion of political peer review, however, is a solution to a problem that confronts the mechanism that of how not to embarrass countries that do not volunteer themselves for the process.

Economic reviews have far less potential to hurt the sensibilities of the continent's many autocrats than a political review, which would focus on issues of representation and political rights.

Further complicating adoption of Nepad's peer review in its original form, is that many of the heads of state on the implementation committee would not do well on the most simple of political reviews.

Libya, not known for its human rights but more for the long rule of its leader, is to become a committee member. And Angola, previously slammed by the IMF for lack of transparency on government revenue from oil companies, is also on the committee.

Yet the more attempts are made to let the autocrats safely agree to peer reviews, the more it is being watered down and losing credibility. Ministers' talk already stresses these reviews should be nonconfrontational and more about "peer learning" than review. With these odds, it has clearly been impossible to break the mould of African politics.

The UN Economic Commission for Africa, the Addis Ababa-based research and policy advice body, is likely to do the technical work for peer review on economic and corporate governance. The body has begun studies on 14 countries, but it is far ahead of its time in including indicators covering political representation and rights, institutional effectiveness, economic management and corporate governance.

Nigeria had resisted the commission's role, arguing it is not an African institution, but now seems to have at least agreed that it should conduct the economic reviews.

Having placed peer review on the agenda, it is now up to civil society research groups to steal the thunder from governments that cannot make a break with the past.

A number of nongovernmental research organisations are already planning reviews. If these are to be credible, governments can have no say on if they are conducted or not.

These could in time provide checks and balances to official peer reviews on economic issues. For example, as in Zimbabwe, it was the SA and the Organisation of African Unity election monitors who declared this year's election free and fair. Much damage would have been done to the credibility of the official process if a large number of African civil society groups had cried foul.

To expect African governments to suddenly change their ways, because of Nepad, is delusory. But the ideas in Nepad have given a wider legitimacy to basic ideas on governance that now cannot go away.

Official peer review is to fall far short of what was agreed and promised, but the one positive is that governments who want to cover themselves with Nepad glory will come under increasing scrutiny.

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