

# Africa opens up

The handing in of the first peer review reports signalled a tectonic shift in Africa's governance landscape, even though it will be months before the public knows what's in the reports. **AYESHA KAJEE** shares her insights into this groundbreaking development.

**A**frican heads of state have begun honouring commitments to hold each other accountable in the realm of governance. In June 2005, Nigeria's capital, Abuja, was the scene of the hand-over of the first two reports of the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM).

"Ghana and Rwanda are blazing an important trail," said Marie Angelique Savane of the review's eminent persons panel as she presented the country appraisals to a forum comprised of those leaders who had acceded to being assessed by their fellows.

While this marks a significant milestone in the evolution of the continent's renewal plan, civil society and media representatives were clearly disappointed that the reports were not immediately made public.

Popular participation has been a key mantra of the New Partnership for Africa's Development (Nepad), of which the peer review is an integral element – but African citizens had to be content with the vague promise that the Ghanaian and Rwandan

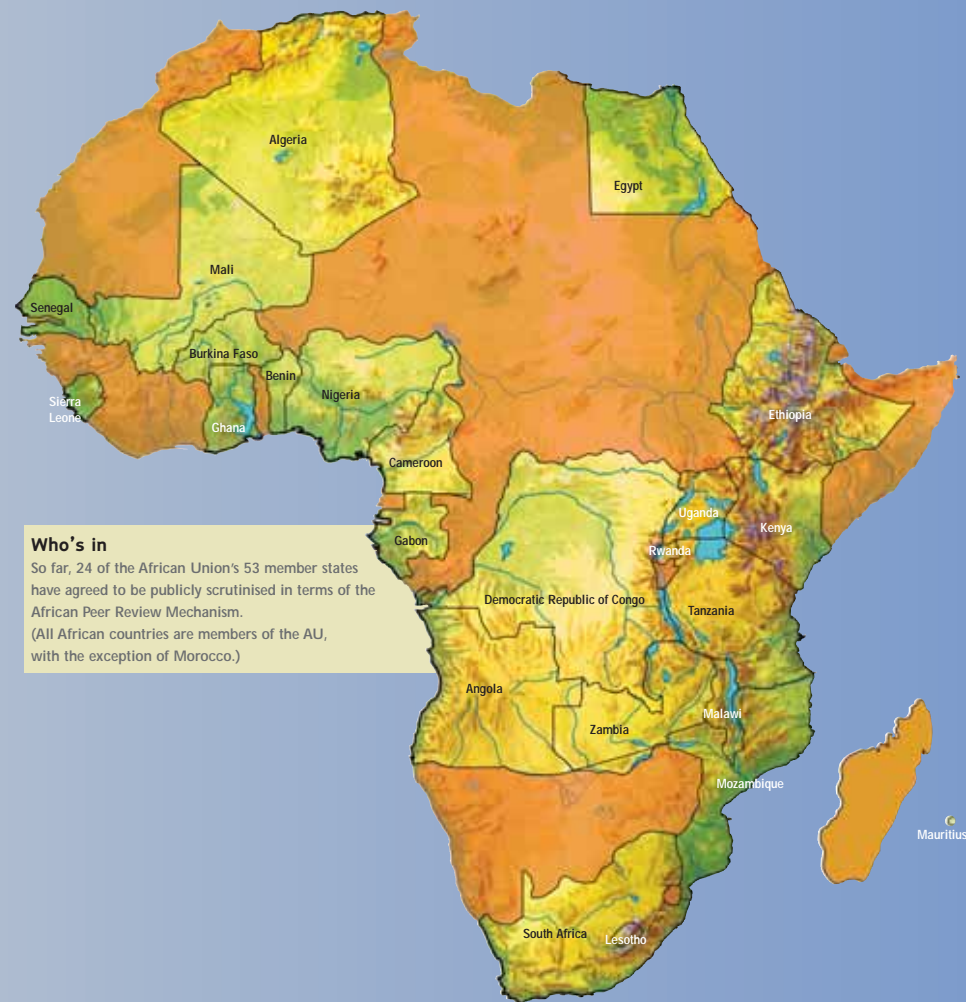
reports would be tabled in the Pan African Parliament during the next six months.

The levels of government control and public engagement in the first review countries have already varied markedly, a challenge that citizens in the upcoming APRM countries must note.

With the South African government's recent announcement that it will undergo review by mid-2006, it behoves South Africans from all walks of life to ensure that their concerns are raised and that the local process becomes a true partnership between government and civil society.

"We would like to have a situation," said Public Service and Administration Minister Geraldine Fraser-Moleketi, "where the APRM is discussed in taxis, stokvels, academic institutions, schools – any place where people get together."

Her ministry, the focal point for South Africa's APRM, is already facing questions regarding the representation of civil society in the official APRM – together with criticisms that



## Who's in

So far, 24 of the African Union's 53 member states have agreed to be publicly scrutinised in terms of the African Peer Review Mechanism. (All African countries are members of the AU, with the exception of Morocco.)

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## How the APRM process unfolds

The African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM) has five phases, with the panel of seven eminent Africans overseeing the process. In Phase One, the review country must:

- Set up an APRM Focal Point to co-ordinate the process (in South Africa, it is the Ministry of Public Service and Administration);
- Consult with key stakeholders (including all sectors of civil society);
- Complete the self-assessment questionnaire; and
- Prepare a draft action plan for implementation between the first review and the next (anticipated to be a five-year period).

Concomitantly, in order to identify the major governance challenges or 'Big Issues' in that country, the continental APRM Secretariat, together with partner organisations such as the African Development Bank, collects

and analyses data for the review country and undertakes preliminary visits.

The second step is the actual country review visit, where a team headed by one of the eminent persons conducts in-depth interviews and investigations to assess the country's governance climate. The review team includes experts in each of the four focal areas of the peer review – political governance, economic governance, corporate governance and socio-economic development. Civil society players can make submissions to the team and lobby to be interviewed during this phase.

Thirdly, the review team produces a draft country report and action plan, based on the self-assessment report as well as its own findings during the review visit. This includes recommendations for improving governance in the inter-review period. The country report is shared with

government, but cannot be amended, although responses may be attached as an appendix.

The fourth stage is the review of the draft report by the eminent persons panel, which subsequently presents it, with recommendations, to the Forum of APRM heads of state, as transpired in Nigeria in June. The peer element occurs during the Forum's deliberations and pressure may be exerted on the head of the review country to implement recommendations. Fellow heads of state interrogate the action plan, and may offer support to each other's governments, where feasible, in implementing it. This may include sharing human resources and technical expertise.

In the final phase, the country's report and action plan are publicly tabled at national and continental level, in organs such as the continental parliament.

the proposed timeframe will preclude adequate civic participation in what is undoubtedly a highly complex initiative.

The African mechanism is groundbreaking in its potential scope, breadth and vision. While peer reviews within the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) have traditionally been limited to specific thematic areas, the APRM attempts a comprehensive

scrutiny of political, economic and corporate governance as well as socio-economic development and the efficacy of social service delivery.

It is arguably the single most significant component of Nepad, constituting a litmus test of African governments' political will and diverging from the sovereignty-above-all theme previously beloved of African dictators and kleptocrats.

When the revamped African Union pledged at its launch in 2003 that Africa had entered a new era that would see governments holding each other to account for corruption, poor oversight and irresponsible leadership, the cynics and Afro-pessimists shrugged in disbelief. It had all been said before, with little or no follow-through. Two years on, 23 of the union's member states have agreed to be publicly scrutinised, and the first reviews have been

completed, signalling a tectonic shift in Africa's governance landscape.

Despite this, critics note that since peer review is voluntary, the worst defaulters are unlikely to sign up for it. They cite gross abuses of human rights in countries such as Zimbabwe (not a signatory of the APRM) and, perhaps more worryingly, infringement of civil liberties even in APRM countries, among them Nigeria and Egypt. Others have slated the APRM as a thinly-disguised structural adjustment programme, which will be used by rich nations as a conditionality for development aid and foreign investment.

But Dr Bernard Kouassi of the APRM Secretariat cautions that the peer review should be seen neither as a scorecard to compare countries nor as an instant panacea for all the continent's ills. "It is a gradual process," he says, "where countries engage in a dialogue with both good and bad practices reviewed, with the intention to identify best practices and solve problems ... so that Africa as a whole benefits."

Perhaps the greatest challenge for South Africa and the other countries due to be reviewed is that of making the APRM a process that is accessible, understood and owned by citizens. The 80-page self-assessment questionnaire, meant to guide the APRM process, contains technical terms and complex language.

"It's like asking people to launch a rocket to the moon," was one Mauritian analyst's reaction when first exposed to the concept. "It overwhelms them, and they remain outside of the process because they feel they don't have the time or resources to participate."

Professor SKB Asante, who spearheaded the Ghana self-assessment, concedes that: "This strange animal called the African Peer Review Mechanism presented a major challenge to the country. We were sailing in uncharted waters (and) we had to be innovative."

South Africa's Dr Chris Stals, who led the Ghana team, acknowledges that the process is "complicated and time-consuming", adding that "political will from the president downwards" was key to Ghana's success.

Asante attributes Ghana's success to the "high level of public participation and the independence of the review process from government." This resulted directly from civil society pressure, which demanded broad-based consultation as early as November 2003. By contrast, the Rwandan and Mauritian processes have been criticised for high levels of

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government control and inadequate civic input. To ensure credibility, the countries next in line should heed these lessons and ensure that the voices of African citizens are heard throughout the review process and even beyond it.

Indeed, Stals sees the review report as just the start of improving governance in Africa. "The process of APRM does not end with the report. In fact, that is the beginning of a process where the people will guide the implementation of the action plan. We have planted a small seed within the people ... and I believe it will grow."

But he also cites the delay in the public release of the reports as his biggest disappointment. "We worked so hard to present the report and now it has disappeared," he noted in early September 2005. "People are waiting with keen interest to see the report."

African citizens must lobby for the APRM reports and action plans to be released timeously; and need to become the monitors and guardians of their implementation. Such vigilance will ensure that leaders sustain the political courage they displayed in initiating the peer review.

Only then will Africa and her people move towards the light of sustained and sustainable social development, participatory democracy and economic prosperity. ■



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