

With Trump election win, Africa braces for U.S. aid cuts

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With a smirk on his face, then-President Donald Trump walks to his seat after speaking during a luncheon with African leaders at the Palace Hotel during the United Nations General Assembly, Wednesday, Sept. 20, 2017, in New York. (AP Photo/Evan Vucci)

Nairobi, November 9 (RHC)-- As the results of the United States presidential election came in on Wednesday, showing that former President Donald Trump had won, relief took hold more than 11,000 kilometres (7,000 miles) away, in Uganda's capital Kampala.

“The sanctions are gone,” the East African country’s parliamentary speaker, Anita Among, told parliament, hinting at her expectation of improved ties with the US under Trump. The speaker is one of a series of Ugandan officials who have been barred from entering the U.S. in recent years because of allegations of human rights violations against them.

But while some African governments that have faced allegations of authoritarianism in recent years might find reason to celebrate, sanctions are not the only thing that might go under Trump, warn analysts: US aid might too.

Four days after Trump’s re-election, Africa is grappling with the prospects of what his second term could mean for the continent. His win on Tuesday over Vice President Kamala Harris drew immediate congratulations from African leaders, with Egypt’s Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, Ethiopia’s Abiy Ahmed, Nigeria’s Bola Tinubu, and South Africa’s Cyril Ramaphosa among those to quickly reach out to Trump.

Yet, many experts believe Trump’s foreign policy will prioritise transactional relationships and shift away from multilateral partnerships, with aid, trade, and climate agreements now uncertain. Trump’s focus, they warn, could be limited to how Africa fits within his broader geopolitical objectives, especially concerning his rivalry with China. Those who fall in line will be favoured, others pressured to conform – that, say analysts, was Trump’s track record during his first stint in power, between 2017 and 2021.

“He is a dealer. He transacts based on what he can get,” said Christopher Isike, professor of African studies and international relations at the University of Pretoria.

Patrick Bond, professor and political sociologist at the University of Johannesburg, said he expected leaders who have faced scrutiny over their human rights records – such as Uganda’s Yoweri Museveni and Rwanda’s Paul Kagame – to try to curry favour with Trump. Both Museveni and Kagame have long been important US allies, and their supporters have pushed back against more recent attacks on their human rights records, insisting that the leaders remain widely popular in their countries.

Zimbabwe’s President Emmerson Mnangagwa, who has also faced US sanctions, also praised Trump’s victory, describing him as a leader who “speaks for the people”.

Samuel Oyewole, a Nigerian political science lecturer, remarked that Trump is unlikely to let human rights and democratic norms drive his relationship with African leaders.

“The emphasis on human rights and democracy, which was emphasised by Biden, may not be prioritised for strategic interest under Trump,” Oyewole told Al Jazeera.

Trump may actually target countries deemed to be acting against U.S. interests, warned Oyewole.

This could strain relationships with democracies like South Africa, which has criticised US support for Israel and maintains strong ties with Russia and China. South Africa, which – despite recent tensions with Washington, counts on the US as a key economic and strategic partner – will not want that.

“I look forward to continuing the close and mutually beneficial partnership between our two nations across all domains of our cooperation,” Ramaphosa wrote in his congratulatory message to Trump on X.

Trump’s return to office also places the future of the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) in jeopardy, with the current agreement set to expire next September, say analysts.

The AGOA, first enacted in 2000, provides African countries with duty-free access to the US market for specific products. Trump, known for his aversion to multilateral agreements, may view AGOA as leverage to negotiate more advantageous bilateral deals, risking the existing framework, warn experts.

“Trump will use every instrument at his disposal, including AGOA, to strong-arm African governments,” said Isike.

In December 2022, Biden's administration pledged \$55 billion over three years to African nations, but this investment could be at risk as Trump reorients US foreign aid towards his strategic priorities. Bond warned that the AGOA could be "up for grabs" as Trump leverages these issues in negotiations.

Oyewole suggested Trump would also deploy aid strategically, conditioned on the continent's alignment with his interests – just as the incoming president has threatened to do with other parts of the world, such as in Ukraine. "We cannot consider Trump to be Father Christmas," he said.

U.S. aid to Africa, currently about \$8 billion annually, could face cuts under Trump, especially programs like PEPFAR (the U.S. President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief), which forms a significant part of US aid. Vaccine programs, HIV/AIDS programs, and reproductive health programs are among those at risk.

Further, analysts said Trump's climate scepticism poses a major concern for the continent. He previously withdrew the U.S. from the Paris Climate Agreement, and his re-election raises fears of a repeat exit.

Bond emphasised the potential fallout, stating that Trump's approach would be "catastrophic" for Africa, which disproportionately bears climate change's consequences despite minimally contributing to global emissions.

By pulling the US out of climate agreements, Trump would not only curtail Africa's access to international climate funds – needed to tackle everything from water scarcity to food insecurity – but also embolden polluting industries globally, amplifying Africa's climate vulnerability, Bond said.

Trump's victory could also have other geopolitical consequences for Africa. The Biden administration had supported two permanent seats for Africa on the United Nations Security Council.

However, Oyewole pointed out that with Trump's disregard for multilateral institutions, Africa's longstanding aspiration for UN Security Council reforms may face new obstacles.

Trump's rivalry with China also complicates Africa's position, given China's deep investment in the continent. Analysts expect Trump to pressure African nations to distance themselves from Beijing, creating difficult choices for countries reliant on Chinese infrastructure funding and trade.

Yet, that pressure could backfire: Experts argue that Trump's detachment from Africa could spur the continent to seek alternative partnerships.

Isike, the professor, suggested that Trump's disregard might inadvertently encourage African countries to possibly foster stronger intra-continental trade and deeper relationships with nations in Asia and the Middle East.

"If Africa wants to continue on handouts and aid from the U.S., then it [Trump's election] is catastrophic," Isike said. "But maybe it is a good thing for Africa so that we can look elsewhere in terms of our trade partners and alliances."

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