

Kikwete: the voice of Africa

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Tanzania's President, Jakaya Mrisho Kikwete, has been his country's leader for just five years but has already established himself in the international sphere as a politician of substance, attracting praise both from within and outside Africa. Since taking office in late 2005, he has notched up an impressive series of diplomatic successes that have raised Tanzania's international profile and his credibility as an African interlocutor.

President Kikwete took on that role most recently as host of the 20th World Economic Forum on Africa, which took place in Dar es Salaam between 5th-7th May. Addressing more than 1,000 leaders from 85 countries, including 12 African heads of state and government, he called for partnerships at the local, bilateral and international level to help overcome the many obstacles faced by African nations. "Africa's potential is immense in terms of human and natural resources. It is a contradiction that Africa remains poor," he said at the opening.

The President reminded participants at the closing plenary that the smallest share of global exports comes from Africa – just 3.5 per cent. "Africa remains predominantly a primary producer and importer for industrial use. We produce what we don't consume and we consume what we don't produce," he said. "This cannot continue."

President Kikwete's performance has garnered praise from multilateral lending agencies, NGOs, and foreign lenders, notably from former US president George W. Bush in early 2008, who announced a US\$698 million infrastructure spending package during a visit to the country, praising President Kikwete's commitment to transparency and good governance, noting: "You are a strong leader. I'll just put it bluntly: America doesn't want to spend money on people who steal the money."

The Tanzanian president's standing in Washington was further consolidated when he became the first African head of state to visit the Obama White House in early 2009, where he discussed issues including Africa's most pressing conflicts with President Barack Obama. His authority to speak for the continent was clearly boosted by his term as Chairman of the African Union in 2008.

Determined to make more of a post that has all too often been symbolic – President Kikwete himself has

pointed out that it is not taken seriously enough by African nations themselves – he immediately took an active role in resolving regional issues.

No sooner had he taken office than he stepped in to play a key role in breaking the deadlock in negotiations between Kenya's political rivals, following post-election violence. He has also played a discreet role in talks to seek a peaceful solution to the conflict in Darfur, as well as dealing with the crisis in Zimbabwe.

President Kikwete has also used his position to call for reform of the United Nations, stressing the need for structural reform of the UN Security Council, including Africa's attainment of two permanent seats. "Giving seats to Africa is not about favours, it is a matter of correcting the historical injustice against the continent and its people," Kikwete said to the UN Assembly.

Closer to home, President Kikwete took over in January as head of the East African Community, which brings together Tanzania, Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda, and Burundi.

President Kikwete has repeatedly stressed that Tanzania and other African countries are ready to give up part of their sovereignty for the sake of forging meaningful regional integration.

This year will see a fully-fledged customs union and the launch of a common market. "In East Africa we agreed to move from co-operation to integration, and our entry point is going to be the Customs Union. For five years, we removed tariffs for goods crossing the borders, erected external common tariffs. Now, we are moving towards the common market," he said.

Among the EAC states, Tanzania has sometimes been accused of dragging its feet over greater integration. The President said that during the discussions there were always things that were easier to deal with than others. It was with that realisation in mind that the East African integration process had to move judiciously.

At home, President Kikwete will be under scrutiny to see whether he can stand up to the strong tide of nationalism in Tanzania. In numerous speeches he has indicated his willingness to confront the problem of nationalism head on.

With little challenge to his domestic authority and a second term of office more than likely, Kikwete will become an increasingly active figure on the African diplomatic stage over the next few years.