



New Leadership Takes Over at the African Development Bank

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Mauritanian economist Sidi Ould Tah will take the helm of the African Development Bank (AfDB), the continent's most important financial institution. The election of Ould Tah, who has the proven ability to secure access to funding sources from the wealthy Gulf Arab states, was the result of Donald Trump's isolationist policies. African states' perception of the benefits of a link with the Gulf monarchies indicates the waning influence of Western partners.

Situation of the AfDB. The African Development Bank was established in 1964 to support the economic and social development of African countries within the framework of the Organisation of African Unity (predecessor to the African Union). It is headquartered in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire, and has 81 members—54 African and 27 from outside the continent (including most Western European and North American countries, as well as India, China and Saudi Arabia, among others). It operates by providing loans (interest-free, repayable over up to 50 years), grants, and technical assistance to development-oriented investments in African countries. In its history, nearly 3,000 projects have been financed through the bank to the tune of close to \$50 billion. The most important of these in recent years have been the construction of Africa's largest sewage treatment plant, Gabal El Asfar in Egypt, the expansion of the port of Lome (Togo), and the construction of a bridge linking Senegal and The Gambia. The bank also has initiated electrification projects using solar energy in the Sahara (Desert to Power). The AfDB maintains the highest credit rating (AAA), which gives it wide access to available financing on the global market.

For the past 10 years and two terms, the bank has been led by the charismatic Nigerian economist Akinwumi Adesina, who focused on five priorities financing activities in the areas of food, electrification, connectivity, industrialisation, and improving the quality of life. In practice, the greatest emphasis was put on projects in the areas of climate and

making financial tools equally accessible to men and women. During his terms, the bank's capital increased from \$93 billion to \$318 billion, and in the 2023 and 2024 Aid Transparency Index rankings assessing the transparency of development institutions, AfDB was ranked first (higher than, for example, the World Bank). Last year, the bank reported a net profit of \$351 million. Although the AfDB definitely improved under Adesina, it has been criticised for its relatively low efficiency compared to, for example, the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), which supports a much larger number of projects.

Appointment of New leadership. To select Adesina's successor, the Board of Governors met in Abidjan in May this year. Depending on their contributions to the bank, 59% of the votes are held by African countries (most by Nigeria, South Africa, Algeria, Morocco, Egypt) and 41% by external partners (most by the U.S., Japan, Germany, Canada, and France). Adesina himself looked to Senegalese former Economic Minister Amadou Hott as his successor. South African-backed Bajabulile Swazi Tshabalala, a long-time AfDB staffer, also promoted a continuation of the existing line. The candidate favoured by most Western stakeholders was Zambia's Samuel Munzele Maimbo, who had a career at the World Bank, including as chief of staff (2019-2023) to its director David Malpass, who is a close associate of Trump.

The last to join the fray was Mauritanian economist Ould Tah, who for a decade successfully led the Arab League's Arab Bank for Economic Development in Africa (BADEA) (the

largest stakes are held by Saudi Arabia and Kuwait). He stressed that, unlike his predecessor, he wanted to focus on reforming Africa's financial architecture and unlock large-scale capital on the continent, among other things.

The election proved surprisingly quick, with Ould Tah receiving (by weighted votes) the support of 76% of the Council in the third round of voting. By comparison, Adesina in 2015 was elected on the sixth attempt.

Context of the Election. Ould Tah is a candidate representing North Africa, the region borrowing the most from the AfDB. He was initially supported by only one Sub-Saharan African country—Côte d'Ivoire. However, the imposition of tariffs by the U.S. on African countries, the [abrupt dismantling of USAID](#), cuts in funding for development programmes in Africa, and the announcement of the withdrawal of \$555 million in U.S. funding for the AfDB's African Development Fund (ADF, about 6-7% of its budget) proved crucial in changing the balance of power before the election of the bank's new director. These actions, in the context of development policy cuts by a number of European countries, such as Sweden, France, and the UK, have undermined confidence in Africa in Western partners as a solid foundation for institutions such as the AfDB.

In this situation, the prospect of closer cooperation with wealthy Arab states, such as Qatar, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Saudi Arabia, and Oman, leading to their increasing economic involvement in Africa and developing long-term plans to it, seemed rational. The growing influence and authoritarianism of the Arab states are associated with a number of risks, as recently pointed out by Djibouti's President Ismail Guelleh, among others. He sharply criticised the policies of the UAE, the continent's largest investor at \$110 billion (2024) as destabilising the continent and deepening military footholds "under the guise of economic development". The UAE, for example, uses financial pressure on African states to [supply arms and mercenaries through them to the genocidal Rapid Support Forces \(RSF\) militia in Sudan](#). Thus, while the motivations behind the activities of emerging regional powers raise very serious questions, their ability to quickly allocate significant financial

resources appears from the perspective of African states to be an irreplaceable asset. This is why in recent weeks Ould Tah, firmly embedded in the Gulf financial world and perceived as an "intermediary" between the region and Africa, rose rapidly.

Outlook. The AfDB under the new leadership will need time to realistically modify its course. It is, however, still bound by the bank's 2024-2033 strategy adopted under Adesina.

Ould Tah will be forced to operate in a disrupted global financial environment influenced by U.S. tariff policies and the risk of a new oil crisis arising from the expanding conflict in the Middle East. The bank will therefore come under pressure to pursue an ambitious agenda, such as climate-resilient agriculture, but with shrinking resources. This situation will not be conducive to building a predictable partnership with the Gulf monarchies, rather it will make the bank dependent on bailouts to maintain its liquidity. In this context, it would be beneficial to expand African sources of funding from both states and private actors.

It will also be a challenge to maintain the AfDB's status as an effective institution in mobilising global partnerships for development efforts in Africa. This role may fall more to the International Development Association (IDA) within the World Bank, to which Trump has maintained the U.S. contribution of \$3.2 billion.

From the point of view of Poland and the EU, it would be beneficial to maintain, stabilise, and develop the AfDB's capacity to support ventures that foster economic and social development in Africa and thus reduce the causes of irregular migration. It is therefore important that, despite the U.S. withdrawal of funding from the bank and the AfDB's own turn towards the Gulf, European countries seek innovative means of cooperation that, for example, ensure synergies between the bank's activities and investments from the EU under the Global Gateway programme. This would help demonstrate to African countries that a loss of trust in the U.S. as a partner should not necessarily result in a similar assessment of European partners. In this context, Poland could consider the benefits of possibly joining the AfDB as a shareholder.