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South Africa's Reaction to the APRM Report: Integrity of the APRM in Jeopardy?ⁱ

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Media attention has recently been held by the South African government's alleged rejection of the APRM report on the country. The South African government is said to have rejected the findings of the APRM based on the fact that it ignores South Africa's unique historical background and overlooks some of the corrective initiatives already taking place in the country. This has led to an outcry, where the government's response has been viewed as an attempt to discredit the APRM initiative whose team of expert reviewers are described by the South African government as engaging in the processes with "ideological and value-laden propositions." This is seen as particularly unacceptable and disheartening, given South Africa's leadership role on the continent and its veneration as the "last great hope" for Africa.

Of the seventeen countries that acceded to the review process so far, only Ghana, Kenya and Rwanda have been reviewed. Although blind-sighted by some of the findings of the reviewer's report, these countries accepted the APRM report and are in the process of implementing the APRM's recommendations without demur. This has evidently not been the case in South Africa. The APRM process in South Africa, the fourth country to be reviewed, is currently in the third of five phases. During this phase, the team prepares a report based on the briefing material presented by the

APRM Secretariat and information provided in-country by official and un-official sources involving all stakeholders. During this stage, the draft is discussed with the government concerned to juxtapose the team's findings with the said government's own perceptions and data. It was the preliminary outcome of these discussions, which were designed to ensure the accuracy of the information and to provide the government with an opportunity both to react to the team's findings and to put forward its own views on how the identified shortcomings may be addressed, that the South African media got wind of.

South Africa questioning the findings of the APRM raised an outcry from the media and academia alike. How could South Africa, the continental leader and champion of the African cause across the globe, challenge and discredit the validity of the findings it played a huge role in forming? How could such a shining pillar of democracy on the continent dare question the panel of eminent persons and their team of researchers on their findings purely because they presented the country in a negative light? And yet, in this flurry of righteous indignation and opportunistic government-bashing, the potential to engage with the APRM as a NEPAD tool has been overlooked.

South Africa's reaction raises some pertinent questions around the APRM that need further investigation. Firstly if South Africa, which agreed to participate in the process voluntarily, cries foul over the report, what are the chances of further buy-in from the rest of the continent? Secondly, is the current evaluation framework of the APRM really universally applicable in ALL African countries? If not, in what ways can it be made more context-specific? Finally, should the APRM's inclusion of the nebulous 'civil society' (which in most African countries represents nothing more than a coalition of rubble-rousing anti-government detractors who seek inclusion in these processes to undermine the seat of power often at the service of the opposition) be based on neutral accreditation to differentiate between legitimate sources of constructive criticism and those who encumber the process with criticism for criticism's sake?

One of the continent's key pitfalls is that it views constructive criticism as a threat (as did South Africa) and sees a difference of opinion and critical engagement as a vote of no confidence (as did most commentators on South Africa's statements). The

findings of any appraisal of South Africa's internal dynamics, whether positive or negative, are extremely useful in the drafting of public policy. In the same vein, the challenging of the APRM's findings by South Africa does not de-legitimise the process so much as it presents an opportunity to interrogate and perhaps defend some of the preliminary assumptions and principles for its own future credibility in the eyes of sceptics.

The APRM is the cornerstone of the NEPAD initiative and as such, the APRM seeks to reduce poverty by increasing investment and generating growth in the countries that have voluntarily acceded to it, in line with NEPAD's purpose to be "an integrated socio-economic development framework for Africa." Often accused of being a "paper tiger" because peer review is voluntary and there is no power to enforce sanctions to compel states to adopt reform proposals, APRM endorsers highlight that the APRM was not intended as a peer sanctioning mechanism but rather a peer learning and peer pressure system that ensures that norms and standards are maintained and lessons are learnt. It is envisaged as a self-monitoring organisation designed to ensure good governance, a respect for human rights, to encourage transparency and accountability and to consolidate democracy. The APRM covers issues, codes and standards that form a part of good governance and are essential to sustainable development. It is used as a tool to assess the compliance of African states to the agreed upon norms and standards. These codes and standards are found in the NEPAD document and the goal of this compliance is to accelerate processes of adopting and implementing NEPAD programmes. The belief is that if African states comply with the standards and norms, this will facilitate the implementation of NEPAD programmes and thus develop the continent.

The APRM's greatest benefit is that it encourages a uniformity of standards. States are believed to be more likely to comply with standards if they know that they are being monitored and compared with their peers. Indeed, after attending an APRM workshop in Addis Ababa to provide the media's perspective, journalist Mondli Makhaya stated that the APRM was enthusiastically embraced by the multi-disciplinary group of African intellectuals as "something to believe in - whereas for ages Africans had been measured by the socialist Eastern bloc or the capitalist West, this was a measurement system that Africans had designed."

However, APRM detractors view the initiative as flawed on several fronts. Ensuring socio-economic development on the continent through the use of peer review based conformity to specific standards cannot be selectively applied. The voluntary nature of APRM accession, which excludes the countries in most need of reform and which, by association, cause the greatest obstacle to Africa's collective development, negates NEPAD's accurate initial cognisance of the fact that African countries cannot develop on an individual a basis. It is this combined effort based on the realisation that Africans share a common destiny that formed the basis of the AU's economic integration drive. This is compounded by the non-sanctioning nature of the APRM process. There are no repercussions for gross deviations from continental norms and there are even fewer incentives for their adoption.

Yet, despite the debates that the APRM process has sparked on the continent since its inception, perhaps the most pertinent lesson to be learnt from the South African peer review process is that governments should not see the APRM as a "test" that they can either pass or fail and in which higher grades than the next country should be attained. Instead, states should embrace the peer review as a process that is complementary to their own self-assessment and should embrace the objectivity that external reviewers provide and use their recommendations to inform their public policies to the extent that they deem appropriate. This does not mean that the APRM process should not be interrogated in any way or at any stage of its implementation. It also does not mean that the proposals the review process tables should be rejected outright. Africans should eradicate their wariness of contestation, questioning and critical engagement, for these are the surest indicators of the birth of a vibrant and strong democratic process.

ⁱ *The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Centre for International Political Studies (CiPS) or the University of Pretoria*

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