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G20 South Africa and the last Global South Presidency: What to Expect?

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Abstract

- The Global South cycle ends with South Africa's G20 presidency: In December 2024, South Africa became the first African nation to take over the G20 presidency, following Brazil (2024), India (2023), and Indonesia (2022).
- The challenge for G20 South Africa is to make a transition of presidency to the United States, in a way that sustains the Global South agendas for the next summits.
- Under South Africa's leadership, important goals from past Global South presidencies—like social inclusion, energy security, digital transition, and health equity—are reaffirmed and extended.
- With an emphasis on inclusive growth, industrialisation, employment, food security, and digital governance based on African perspectives, the South African president pursues the theme "Solidarity, Equality, Sustainability."
- In order to make a lasting impact on global governance as the last Global South presidency in this cycle, South Africa aims to advance epistemic justice, integrate civil society, and strengthen multilateralism.



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Context

South Africa took over as G20 president in December 2024. This will be the Global South's final immediate president in the bloc, after Brazil (2024), India (2023), and Indonesia (2022). Since this is the first time an African nation has held the presidency, South Africa has the opportunity to set the agenda and expand on the work during Brazil's presidency.

South Africa's membership in the G20 has special historical and political significance. As the sole African nation to be a member of the G20, South Africa's voice was amplified in 2023 when the African Union (AU) was approved as a permanent member. Even while power imbalances and a viewpoint rooted in Westernised economic rationalities still characterise the G20, the recent admission of the AU was hailed as a step forward in the bloc's diversity.

Concerns are raised regarding what to anticipate from the Global South's final consecutive presidency amid tensions between South Africa and the United States, which will host the G20 in 2026. All of this suggests that the debates will not have the same tone as they had in recent years, with the demands of the southern countries experiencing losses.

The Global South cycle in the G20

An overview of the Global South presidencies reveals that the engagement groups and agendas have remained consistent.

Following the COVID-19 epidemic, Indonesia held the presidency in 2022 under the theme "Recovering together, recovering stronger". Priorities included: 1) global health architecture (particularly to strengthen health systems for future emergencies); 2) digital transformation (to foster technological innovation and digital inclusion); and 3) sustainable energy transition (to promote the use of sustainable practices and renewable energy in the fight against climate change). Highlights of the summit included the adoption of the Bali Declaration and the mediation and debate of the conflict in Ukraine.

The theme of India's presidency (2023) was "One Earth, One Family, One Future", with a focus on public digital infrastructure, green and sustainable development, and reforms in multilateral institutions. Highlights of the summit were the approval of the New Delhi Declaration and the establishment of the Global Bio-fuels Alliance, which aims to promote alternative energy sources, in addition to the African Union's admission as a permanent member.

The theme of Brazil's presidency (2024) was "Building a Just World and a Sustainable Planet", with an emphasis on social inclusion and hunger reduction, energy transition and sustainable development, and reforming institutions of global governance. Among the highlights were the establishment of the G20 Social, the proposal to tax great fortunes, and the creation of the Global Alliance against Hunger and Poverty.

The inability of members to reach consensus on particular policies and stances over the three presidencies demonstrated how hard it is for states in the Global North to give up advantages and hierarchies. Even

though, the African Union's inclusion, the emphasis on sustainable development, the South-South orientation, and the discussions surrounding digital transformation are all examples of progress during the Global South's presidencies.

The time for South Africa

From the struggle against apartheid to the endeavour to formulate foreign policy grounded in racial justice and South-South unity, South Africa has a long history of resistance. Despite its economic and geopolitical significance, the nation is currently dealing with issues including racial inequality, internal conflicts, and pressure from other countries, particularly President Trump.

For Cyril Ramaphosa, South-African president, "This is a valuable opportunity for SA to advance efforts towards greater global economic growth and sustainable development. It is an opportunity to place the needs of Africa and the rest of the Global South more firmly on the international development agenda". With the theme "Solidarity, Equality and Sustainability", the South-African presidency prioritises three objectives: 1) inclusive economic growth, industrialisation, employment and reduced inequality; 2) food security; and 3) AI, data governance and innovation for sustainable development.

As the SA G20 Sherpa, Zane Dangor, stated, the "[South Africa] G20 presidency is guided by its strategic foreign policy pillars: national interest, the African agenda, South-South cooperation and multilateralism". According to Dangor, the AU will be crucial in supporting and bolstering South Africa's position that it will utilise its presidency to represent the goals of the continent, especially with "Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want". According to Dangor, the G20 can support the agenda and make room for pledges to Agenda 2030, the Future Compact, and other projects.

What to expect from the G20 South Africa?

Following the conclusion of the Global South presidency cycle, Northern nations like the United States will once again chair the G20. This emphasises how urgent it is to give other multilateral forums, like the BRICS and other international summits, top priority.

In contrast to the individualistic position of the United States, South Africa has the chance to strengthen the recommendations made by Brazil, India, and Indonesia while also reiterating the significance of multilateral arrangements for resolving common issues. The generation of vital knowledge from the South and workable suggestions for the future G20 declaration's implementation will be determined by this year. Furthermore, it is critical to emphasise the value of multilevel collaboration (including States, social organisations, local governments, and other players) and to incorporate and strengthen civil society in the forum.

One of the major criticisms of the G20 and its engagement groups is the practicality of the proposals: how can solutions be proposed and put into practice? How can progress be measured and monitored from one

presidency to the next? How can consensus be encouraged this year and how can the possible marginalization of Southern agendas be addressed by the United States presidency? These are some of the questions that are generating greater expectations about what to expect from the G20 in South Africa.

Conclusion

Now is the time for South Africa to make a lasting legacy of confirming multilateralism and developing practical solutions to global issues. African and other regional epistemologies could serve as the foundation for multilateralism, which should be more just as well as more representative. Together, we must break with hierarchical logics of power, production, and knowledge in order to map out a future.

Policy Considerations

South Africa can use the following lessons to engage with other countries, particularly Brazil, India, and Indonesia, given the exceptional chance to influence the shift from a Global South presidency to a US president.

1. **Strengthen agenda-setting by the Global South:** Promote mechanisms that allow the African Union and other Southern actors to shape G20 priorities and decisions even if these countries do not hold the G20 presidency.
2. **Foster continuity between presidencies:** Encourage coordinated strategies between successive Global South presidencies to advance collective long-term goals for subsequent G20 presidencies.
3. **Deepen civil society inclusion:** Strengthen multilateralism by integrating diverse and marginalized civil society voices into G20 dialogues and outcomes.
4. **Prioritize inclusive development:** Advocate for policies focused on job creation, industrialization and fair access to technology and resources.
5. **Reimagining global norms through South-South cooperation:** Using the G20 as a space to challenge dominant paradigms and promote epistemic justice. This ensures that G20 presidencies led by the Global South result in concrete structural reforms in global governance, and not just symbolic inclusion.

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