

AU summit move: what choice did they have?

By [Simon Allison](#)

11 Jun 2012

Malawi's principled refusal to invite Sudan's president to the African Union summit in Malawi put the continental body in an impossible quandary. Their solution was imperfect, but the right move in complicated circumstances.



If one ever doubted the influence that just one person can have on the fate of an entire country, then Malawi's new president Joyce Banda should reassure you that a single change in personnel at the very top can turn a struggling, declining nation into one of Africa's brightest prospects. Since taking over two months ago upon the timely death of her predecessor Bingu wa Mutharika, Banda has made a series of bold, difficult decisions that should give Malawi a new lease on life after years of stagnation.

...Her boldest decision was to respect Malawi's international commitments and declare that Sudan's president Omar al-Bashir would be arrested should he set foot on Malawian soil. Bashir is wanted by the International Criminal Court to answer charges of committing genocide in Darfur; Malawi, as a signatory to the Rome Statute which created the court, is obligated to enforce the arrest warrant.

This brave, principled decision is not entirely without self-interest. Malawi is expecting some \$500 million-plus in aid money as the likes of the International Monetary Fund and the Millenium Challenge Corporation queue up to help the popular new president, after aid was almost entirely suspended during Mutharika's second term. A picture of Joyce Banda greeting an alleged war criminal on her own red carpet would have seriously jeopardised the resumption of support, as illustrated by a recent US warning - no doubt directed at Malawi - to cut off aid money from any country that allows Bashir in. Looks like it worked.

The financial incentive should not detract from what was still a courageous decision. The ICC has a bad reputation among most African leaders, who have consistently defied calls to arrest Bashir and dismissed his arrest warrant as just another example of the court's anti-African bias (with the notable exceptions of Botswana, South African and Zambia). By taking the

opposite view, Banda - a relatively young, female leader in a group of old, grumpy men - is openly defying the African consensus, something sure to make her unpopular amongst her counterparts.

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