At the conclusion of the Foreign Affairs ministers' consultative meeting on African Union reforms in Kigali early May, Yusuf Garaad, the Somali Foreign minister took to Twitter to laud the visionary leadership of Rwanda. Garaad was one of many African leaders, who of recent have come out openly to express their admiration and support of the influence Rwanda is having on the continent.

The notable acknowledgement came amidst a period when the leader of Rwanda, President Paul Kagame, has clearly emerged as one of the most practical and influential statesmen in position to shape the future of the continent, currently heading the effort to reform the African Union.

Paul Kagame was handed the task by fellow African leaders during the AU summit in Kigali in July 2016, a summit described Nkosazana Dlamini Zuma as the most successful of her tenure as AU Commission chairperson. At its conclusion Idriss Deby of Chad , then AU chair, lauded the able organisation of Rwanda for the summit. It was a fine hour for President Kagame as it also honoured one of the biggest infrastructure projects of his presidency, the Kigali Convention Centre.

In March during a visit to China, The People's Daily in its coverage of Kagame and First Lady Jeannette Nyiramongi's visit, remarked that Kagame was given a big welcome because he was respected by fellow African leaders. President Xi Jinping was quoted as speaking highly of the efforts by the Rwandan president to boost political mutual trust and enhance economic cooperation.

While Kagame's rising influence on the continent is obvious, it is low key in nature and oriented more to practical solutions and underlined by the success of post-genocide transformation that he presides over in Rwanda. The success has also given him a reverence evidenced in the fact that while other African leaders seeking to prolong their stay in power have attracted intense hostility, his intention to run for a third term- while disappointing to idealists- has been largely welcomed by many as a rather comforting proposition.

To underscore the reverence, Africa’s finest talents have closely associated with him like those he tapped to join the AU reform steering committee like Strive Masiwa, Donald Kaberuka, Tito Mboweni, Acha Leke etc. The third Transform Africa summit this May also saw thousands of delegates exchange smart ideas in Kigali.

Kagame has transformed Kigali into an event hosting city; his insistence on perfection and good hospitality service has meant guests want to come back. Pan Africanist policies like visa on arrival, trade deals, RwandAir rapid expansion, etc while making a lot of business sense, they are also adding to Africa’s interconnectivity.

“We have been waiting for ourselves”

Throughout his public remarks, the consistent philosophy behind Kagame’s work is that it is Rwandans and Africans who will do the work and solve the problems. Kagame has repeatedly talked about the need to end donor dependence and how mindset change influenced Rwanda’s ability to improve its circumstance in the last two decades.

He said that Africans have all along been waiting for themselves to solve their problems as no one else will do. He underscored the importance of unity of purpose in pushing forward the reforms. “This process is not about what each country can do on its own but what we can all do together, for each other and with each other,” President Kagame said.

If a united front is sustained and leads to the success of the AU reforms , there is no doubt it could be a basis for African countries to work together achieve even bigger goals like a free trade area, joint infrastructure projects and a common defence

policy.

Travelling regularly for business and political deals, opening up markets and investment opportunities, in Rwanda and for Rwandan businesses. Trade with its related human interaction is a strong tool for African unity

Kagame has built relations with leaders in Central and West Africa including the French speaking countries, though relations with Southern Africa have moved on a slower pace.

A new era statesman

The prime time of African statesmen was the immediate post colonial period in the 1960s when the likes of Kwame Nkrumah, Mwalimu Nyerere, Ben Bella, Gamel Nasser, Emperor Haille Selassie etc were dominant but theirs was an era characterised by ideological fights.

At present, no visible ideological wars are present on the continent among the leaders though in the population Islamic extremism and other forms of religious/ cultural fundamentalism are very present. Regardless, the opportunity to work within the formal institutions of African integration like a reformed African Union presents a big opportunity for Kagame to have a lasting legacy on Africa.

Having earned the acknowledgement of colleagues and his own clarity of purpose, Kagame’s style has the advantage of not attracting open opposition and resentment from other ambitious leaders. This is different from the bombast of previous pan African leaders notably Muammar Gaddafi and Nkrumah whose individual ambitions overshadowed the cause.

While the previous statesmen delivered independence from colonialism, the new era statesmen are looked at to lead liberation through mindset change and economic transformation.