

‘This question of African unity’: 50 years After the founding of the AOU

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In his famous speech, in which he made the most convincing case for the formation of a strong union of the continent, Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, described as ‘the great crusader of African unity’ by Mualimu Julius Nyerere of Tanzania, told his peers on 25 May 1963 in Addis Ababa that ‘Unite we must. Without necessarily sacrificing our sovereignties, big or small, we can here and now forge a political union based on defence, foreign affairs and diplomacy, and a common citizenship, an African currency, an African monetary zone and an African central bank.’ He went on to urge them ‘We must unite in order to achieve the full liberation of our continent. We need a common defence system with African high command to ensure the stability and security of Africa... We will be mocking the hopes of our people if we show the slightest hesitation or delay in tackling realistically *this question of African unity*’.¹

Fifty years on, the unification of Africa remains beyond the horizon. While Africa has come a long way since the hey days of independence from colonial rule and the formation of the Organization of African Unity (OAU), the progress that the continent has made towards ‘tackling realistically this question of African unity’, as Nkrumah put it, leaves a lot to be desired. As the AU and member states are marking the 50th anniversary of the founding of the OAU under the theme ‘Pan-Africanism and African Renaissance’, it is imperative that we heed the counsel of former South African President Thabo Mbeki that in the context of the 50th anniversary of the OAU ‘We must answer some questions honestly: What progress have we made towards the achievement of the objectives set by the OAU, African Union (AU) and New African Partnership for Africa’s Development (NEPAD)? What shall we do in this regard?’² Accordingly, in what follows, I seek to put the 50 years journey of the OAU/AU with respect to ‘this question of African unity’ to a brief but critical scrutiny.

‘This question of African unity’ at the founding of the OAU

In his globally acclaimed and very famous book, *The Wretched of the Earth*, published in 1961 at the height of the triumphant years of the liberation of the

¹ Kwame Nkrumah’s speech delivered on 24 May 1963 reprinted in the New African Magazine, July 2012 No. 519, pp26-31, at 29.

² Thabo Mbeki, *The African Union at 10 years old: A dream deferred*, available on <http://www.thabombekifoundation.org.za/Pages/The-African-Union-at-10-years-old-A-Dream-Deferred.aspx>

countries of the continent from colonial rule, the great revolutionary and thinker Frantz Fanon observed about the raging political rhetoric of African unity

We may understand why keen-witted international observers have hardly taken seriously the great flights of oratory about African unity, for it is true that there are so many cracks in that unity visible to the naked eye that it is only reasonable to insist that all these contradictions ought to be resolved before the day of unity can come.³

Indeed, in that historic month of May 1963 in Addis Ababa the 32 heads of state and government represented various forces including revolutionaries, reactionary and feudal forces, nationalists and puppets of former colonial powers. These diverse group of leaders were divided into two large blocks: the few of them supporting Nkrumah's vision of a united states of Africa and the conservative and gradualist block that sought nothing more than a loose association.

The outcome of the meeting of these ideologically opposed groupings was the formation of the OAU. The OAU Charter reflected the victory of the forces of *status quo* and the defeat of Nkrumah's vision of unity. G. G. Collins, British High Commissioner in Accra, in a 1963 memo described the defeat of Nkrumah's vision of unity in the following terms

'He (Nkrumah) had asked for a continental government of a Union of African States with a common foreign policy and diplomacy, common citizenship and a capital city; he got a loose organization which specifically provides for its members to be able to renounce their membership.

He had said that the Union of Africa would solve all border problems; he got a Commission of Mediation and clauses among the Principles of the Organization referring to non-interference in the internal affairs of states and to unreserved condemnation of subversive activities on the part of neighbouring states.

He had asked for a continent-wide economic and industrial programme to include a common market and a common communications system, and a monetary zone with a central bank and currency; he got only a promise that commissions for matters economic and social, educational and cultural, scientific and technical might be set up.

He had asked for plans for a common system of defence; he got only the promise of a defence commission. When the conference Resolution to set up a Liberation Bureau was implemented, Ghana was not included.⁴

The OAU since 1963: Hardening of the colonial fences

³ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), 132-133.

⁴ Quoted in Osei Boateng, OAU and Western Penetration Efforts, *New African*, May 2013 No. 528, 142-147, at 147.

In the years following 1963, the OAU years of the Cold War further entrenched existing divisions and added new ones. This expressed itself in at least three ways.

First, the expression in the commencing words of the OAU Charter 'We the Heads of State and Government' was applied to its limits. The OAU became no more than a trade union of heads of state and governments, many of whom became in subsequent years violent dictators, kleptocrats, self-appointed emperors and presidents for life. Whatever unity that emerged within the OAU was a unity in dictatorship, corruption and misery. As the post-independence political class used its hold on power to accumulate personal wealth, indulge in excessive abuse of power and perfect despotic and violent rule as powerfully mirrored in Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Wizard of the Crow*, the promise and hope of the liberation struggle including the dream of unity soon turned into a nightmare in many of the newly independent countries.

Second, the OAU served as a framework for entrenching the juridical sovereignty of its member states, which more often than not was used to shield the corrupt and violent system of governance perfected in many of its member states. First, in the Cairo meeting in 1964 OAU member states adopted the principle of *Uti Possidetis* validating the borders drawn at the Berlin Conference of 1885. This solidified the deeply arbitrary colonial divisions of the continent and foreclosed the possibility of rectifying them. Second, OAU members, exercising their newly found sovereignty, adopted legal regimes relating to tariff and customs as well as entry and exit requirements. Third, shackled by its dogmatic adherence to the principle of non-intervention, the OAU became a witness to the rampant misrule and the many violations that took place in many countries including Central African Republic, Uganda, Equatorial Guinea, and former Zaire.

The above developments had two negative consequences to the unity of the continent. First, they hardened the colonial fences separating the countries and peoples of Africa, deepening the colonial division of the continent and limiting free movement of people and goods. Second, they gave rise to a politics of indifference that blocked OAU and its member states from speaking out and taking action against the violent and corrupt rule to which many people on the continent were subjected.

Third, the Cold War added a further division between the countries of the continent, as a divided and weak Africa was soon turned into a major theatre of the Cold War. As in the past, the interventions of the Cold War by global powers on the continent proved to be destructive.

Former South African President Thabo Mbeki best captured this devastation in the following terms

Concretely, among other things, this resulted in such negative developments as the corruption of the African independence project through the establishment of the system of neo-colonialism, the overthrow of governments which resisted this, support for the white minority and colonial regimes in Southern Africa, seen as dependable anti-communist and anti-Soviet allies, the assassination of such leaders as Patrice Lumumba, Thomas Sankara and Eduardo Mondlane, sponsorship of such instrumentalities as UNITA in Angola and RENAMO in Moçambique, support for predatory and client regimes such as those of Mobutu in the then Zaire, and of Houphouët-Boigny in Côte d'Ivoire.⁵

The above political, economic and security developments produced Africa of the 1990s.

The OAU in the 1990s: African states individually disintegrating?

In his advocacy for heeding his vision of African unity, Nkrumah warned Africa that the failure to unify had serious consequences. He thus stated

Salvation for Africa lies in unity ... for in unity lies strength and I see it, African states must unite or sell themselves out to imperialist and colonialist exploiters for a mess of pottage or disintegrate individually.⁶

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Thus, the immediate post-Cold War period became one of the darkest, bloodiest and bleakest of times for Africa. Outside of the slave trade and colonial era, at no other time violence have been more horrific and devastating than during this period. OAU member states were 'disintegrating individually' and it was as though Africa has gone 'from the frying pan into the fire'.

5 Thabo Mbeki, The Architecture Of Post-Cold War Africa - Between Internal Reform and External Intervention, Address at the Makerere University Institute Of Social Research, 19 January 2012, available on <http://www.thabombekifoundation.org.za/Pages/ADDRESS-BY-THABO-MBEKI-AT-THE-MAKERERE-UNIVERSITY-INSTITUTE-OF-SOCIAL-RESEARCH-CONFERENCE-ON-THE-ARCHITECTURE-OF-P0119-651.aspx>

6 Kwame Nkrumah, African Must Unite (New York: Frederick A Praeger Publisher, 1963), at 145.

None of those who scrambled for the domination of countries of the continent were there at the continent's particular time of need. Steven A. Holmes in a March 1983 edition of the New York Times put it thus

Having been carved up and colonized by European powers and turned into pawns, knights and rooks on a cold war chessboard by the superpowers, Africa now faces a devastating new problem: indifference.⁷

Even the United Nations Organization (UN), the body with the primary responsibility for international peace and security, was unwilling to decisively act to avert the calamities of the 1990s.

Africa was left on its own to deal with all the distortions and mess that the Cold War rivalry left behind at the wake of its demise. As former Secretary General of the UN, Kofi Annan put it, 'Across Africa, undemocratic and oppressive regimes were supported and sustained by the competing super-Powers in the name of their broader goals but, when the cold war ended, Africa was suddenly left to fend for itself.'⁸

However, Africa was ill-prepared, weak and divided to 'fend for itself'. The OAU, which developed into a disappointing symbol of the (dis)unity of the continent, failed terribly to do anything meaningful to avert or mitigate many of the calamities of the 1990s. As in the previous decades, it did very little other than being witness to the brutal death, mayhem and displacement of millions of Africans and to its member states 'disintegrating individually'.

The AU: A false dawn of African unity?

In an attempt to respond to these above situations, an ad hoc coalition of African countries provided a leadership for charting the transformation of the OAU into the AU. The transformation of the OAU to the AU is indeed a major development in the evolution towards achieving the ideals of pan-Africanism. As Murithi rightly pointed out the AU 'was supposed to usher Africa into a new era of continental integration, leading to a deeper unity and a resolution of its problems.'⁹

Under the AU, a number of instruments covering a wide range of subjects have been articulated and adopted by its member states. Within the framework of

⁷ Steven A. Holmes, *The World: Africa, From The Cold War To Cold Shoulders*, *The New York Times* (7 March 1993)

⁸ Kofi Annan, *The Causes of Conflict and the Promotion of Durable Peace and Sustainable Development in Africa*, Report of the Secretary General to the Security Council (April, 1998) para. 11, available on http://www.un.org/africa/osaa/reports/A_52_871_Causes%20of%20Conflict%201998.pdf

⁹ Timothy Murithi, 'Introduction: Contextualizing the debate on a union government for Africa', in Timothy Murithi (ed.) *Towards a Union Government for Africa: Challenges and Opportunities* (ISS Monograph 140, 2008) 4.

these instruments AU member states made commitments for institutionalizing a just socio-economic system able to deliver growth and equitable development, a democratic system and a common mechanism for dealing with the scourge of violence and conflicts on the continent as well as promote intra-African trade and economic integration.

Compared to the OAU years, Africa indubitably registered some commendable progress under the AU. This is particularly true with respect to peace and security as well as economic growth and indeed in the promising economic performance of countries of the continent. Indeed, a number of countries that went through a violent conflict in the 1990s including Rwanda, Liberia and Sierra Leone have made remarkable progress. Similarly, although the focus of much of the news headlines remain on conflicts and violence, increasing number of countries have enjoyed stability during the past decade even in parts of the continent that are generally regarded as being conflict prone. By any standard of measurement, these are indeed very promising achievements.

However, the promises unfulfilled are far more than those realized and the cohesion and leadership of the founding years of the OAU is now fading. Africa thus exhibits frightening levels of disunity in various spheres. There are two major factors that account for this: weak ideological and political foundation of African unity and the lack of the key factors of economic integration on the continent.

Weak ideological and political foundation of African unity

A major factor that explains the current state of disunity on the continent is the lack or absence of firm ideological conviction on the part of the political leadership of the continent to the cause of African unity. The weakness of the ideological and political foundation of African unity manifests itself in so many ways.

One manifestation is the pursuit by AU member states of competitive and rival policy positions on political and security issues on the continent. In this regard, one area of manifest failure President Mbeki raised was what he called 'the shameful African disunity and indecisiveness which resulted in the debacles in Cote d'Ivoire and Libya, which put in serious doubt our ability to determine our destiny, with present and continuing serious negative consequences for our continent'.¹⁰ Apart from Cote d'Ivoire and Libya, this disunity was also on display in a number of situations including Mali, Guinea Bissau, Madagascar, CAR and DRC.

Related to the above is the apparent collapse of the coalition of countries that facilitated the transformation of the OAU to the AU. Although it started off very

¹⁰ Thabo Mbeki, The African Union at 10 years old: A dream deferred, available on <http://www.thabombekifoundation.org.za/Pages/The-African-Union-at-10-years-old-A-Dream-Deferred.aspx>

well at the turn of the century, currently the AU suffers from a dearth of leadership even on the part of its most pivotal member states including South Africa and Nigeria.

In significant number of member states of the AU, there is no comprehensive political settlement or national consensus and as a result the state is both contested among various political forces and is used as an instrument of advancing the interests of those controlling its machinery. As a result most of these states remain fragile (and hence constitute among the structural weakest links in the equation for African unity) as the conflicts that erupted in 2012/2013 in Mali, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Central African Republic (CAR) illustrated.

The linguistic divisions of the continent inherited from Africa's colonial past is resurfacing again. The anglophone and francophone division is increasingly influencing intra-African international relations and indeed the relations of the continent with old global powers. It came out prominently during the campaign for the election of the Chairperson of the AU Commission during 2012. Since then it manifested itself in different ways and most currently in the debate during the 23rd Ordinary Meeting of the Executive Council in which francophone countries led by Senegal strongly opposed to the inclusion of the situation of Western Sahara as an agenda item.

A further manifestation of the lack of ideological conviction to the ideals of African unity is the failure of African states to incorporate into their domestic frameworks and adhere to the various commitments they freely subscribed to under the AU. In this regard, former South African president Thabo Mbeki pointed out that one of the AU's failures is ensuring that member states 'respect the imperatives for democratic rule as spelled out in the Constitutive Act, and related decisions, centred on the strategic perspective that the people – the African masses – must govern'.

Moreover, despite their declarations and rhetoric most AU member states do not mobilise the required political, material, human and financial resources for supporting the activities of the AU and for implementation of decisions they adopted within the framework of the AU. The result is that the AU depends for much of its program activities on donor funding. For example, close to 90% of the funding for AU peace and security activities authored by the Peace and Security Council comes from AU partners support.

Lack of key factors of economic integration

Both at independence and currently, Africa lacks the key factors that can facilitate economic integration that strongly leverages the unification process of the continent.

First, the communication and transport infrastructure that networks the countries of the continent remains dismally poor. According to a 2011 World Bank publication, '[t]he road network of 1.75 million kilometres exhibits a low density with respect to population. Its average spatial density is very low by world standards.'¹¹

Second, there are no common regulatory frameworks for trade as well as free movement of people and goods. African countries continue to uphold their individual regulations on tariff and customs as well as entry and exist into and from their territories. The resulting rigidity of the colonial fences continues to separate the countries and people of the continent limiting the integration process.

Third, multiplicity of regional groupings (known as regional economic communities (RECs)) and the resultant confusion and incoherence is impeding the integration process. According to a study by United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA), entitled *Assessing Regional Integration in Africa II* published in 2006, 'overlapping mandates and objectives, duplicated integration policies, and the multiple memberships by African countries appear to be slowing integration, reducing the regional economic communities' effectiveness, and stretching thin limited financial resources.'¹²

Fourth, lack of industrialization is a further impediment to the process of economic integration. Given the lack of industries producing finished products, most of the export product of African countries remains to consist of primary products, for which there is no demand among African countries.

As a result of the lack of these key factors of regional economic integration, intra-Africa trade remains dismally poor. Similarly, free movement of people and goods within the continent is very limited.

Conclusion: African unity, a dream deferred?

The foregoing clearly illustrated that 'this question of African unity' encountered betrayals, failures of catastrophic consequences, missed opportunities and currently under the AU a situation that appears to be a false dawn.

To date one of the best formulations of what African unity mean in concrete terms is that of Frantz Fanon who in his *Toward the African Revolution* stated

'The inter-African solidarity must be a solidarity of fact, a solidarity of action, a solidarity of concrete in men, in equipment, in money'¹³

11 Africa's Transport infrastructure, <http://elibrary.worldbank.org/content/book/9780821384565>

12 *Assessing Regional Integration in Africa II*, pages xv-xvi, available on <http://foresightfordevelopment.org/sobipro/55/148-assessing-regional-integration-in-africa-ii-rationalizing-regional-economic-communities>

13 Frantz Fanon, *Toward the African Revolution* (1964/1967) 173.

If such unity is to be achieved, there is a need for re-articulating and reaffirming the commitment for African unity at all levels and more so at the level of the political leadership.

Additionally, in order to avoid that the AU is not a false dawn it is imperative that the emerging trend in the management of the affairs of the continent should be reversed. In this respect the major challenges to be overcome include addressing

the deficit in the ideological conviction of the political classes of the countries of the continent,
the lack of sustainable political commitment,
the current dearth of political leadership on the continent particularly on the part of major countries of the continent, and
the poor supply of the key factors of economic integration

To this end, the AU should mobilize its member states and take the necessary steps to overcome these challenges. The steps to be taken include the following

To reinvigorate the ideological conviction for the unification process not only among the political leadership of the continent but also within the wider public through a rigorous articulation of African unity as a path for development and transformation

To create societal wide awareness of and constituency for African unity and to this end to change the framework of African unity from 'We the Heads of State and Government' to 'We the peoples of Africa'

To encourage through incentives and alliances with grass root actors the incorporation the various policies adopted at the level of the AU into domestic frameworks and practices

To facilitate the emergence of a coalition of countries with dedicated political leadership and commitment for pursuing the dream of African unity and institutionalizing such leadership

To prioritize the speedy development of key factors of economic integration and more particularly the communication and transport as well as regulatory infrastructure for free movement of peoples, goods and services and the diversification of the structure of African economies

To outline a realistic and incentivised roadmap and strategy with benchmarks and realistic timelines as well as follow up mechanisms for economic integration including through creating mechanisms that mobilize resources for rewarding the implementation of regional integration projects

To initiate a process for rationalizing and aligning the role and activities of member states, RECs with the frameworks of the AU
