

POLITICS

BEYOND THE AFRICAN UNIFICATION DEBATE: WHY IS PAN-AFRICAN UNITY STILL A DISTANT DREAM?

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Abstract. The idea of the Unification of Africa is not one that should be easily discarded. It is an idea, however, that has experienced major difficulties for those seeking to implement it. Originating in the African Diaspora, it was taken up by figures such as Kwame Nkrumah and Julius Nyerere. In its first decades, the project of African unity was institutionalised in the Organization of African Unity. The OAU passed through many vicissitudes and was always a conceptual and political battleground divided between those who wanted swift and speedy unification of African states, and those who favoured more cautious approaches. In a period where the OAU has given way to the African Union, the authors make an impassioned plea for the continuation of the unification projection into the future, even if in a more sober manner more attuned to the complexities of a diverse continent.

Keywords: Pan-Africanism, Unity, Looting, Corruption

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I. Introduction

In the early twentieth century, it was the African-Americans who were the first (but not the last) to speak forcefully for African unity. This was especially so after World War I, when, during the drafting of the Treaty of Versailles and the formation of the League of Nations, most Africans could not yet speak for themselves (Harris and Zeghidour 1993: 705). Around the same time, also, the term ‘United States of Africa’ was mentioned first by the African-American leader Marcus Garvey (Cronon 1969 [1955]: 185). Garvey’s ideas deeply influenced the birth of the Pan Africanist movement, which reached a climax in 1945 with the Fifth Pan-African congress in Manchester, attended by (among others) W. E. B. Du Bois, George Padmore, Jomo Kenyatta, and Kwame Nkrumah (Soares 2007). Later, Nkrumah and Haile Selassie took this idea forward by fostering the formation of the 37 member Organization of African Unity, the precursor of today’s African Union (Kah 2016: 154). “Pan Africanism”, thus, “can be said to have its origins in the struggles of the African people against en-

slavement and colonization". This highlighted a point stressed by Kwame Nkrumah at the end of the 1950s:

Africans must never forget that they [diaspora blacks] are part of Africans, because they knew the suffering which they were going through so they decide they must in one way or the other must help them. These were sons and daughters of Africa who were taken away from African shores and . . . they have not forgotten their ancestral links... So when Africans were marching towards the complete emancipation of the continent, independent status will help in no small measure that their efforts to attain full human rights and dignity as citizens of their country. (Nkrumah 1958 quoted in Harris and Zeghidour 1993: 705)

These efforts by the first generations of leaders of Africa and its diaspora to unite their continent came to little or nothing (Banienuba 2013). Africa may be one, but we cannot, yet, say that of Africans. Even as the factors that make African unity a necessity continue to impact the continent and its peoples, the perception remains that the time is not yet right to unite. The necessity of unification is not something new to history, or unique to Africa: in fact it is the way that most countries have come into being, at least in their contemporary forms. After winning its independence from Britain, the United States was only a collection of 13 loosely connected states: China has only known unity for a fraction of its 6000 year history, being otherwise in a constant condition of warring factions and kingdoms; Germany, meanwhile, was only a collection of 30 independent states for a thousand years, before its unification in 1871. Every major power that one may name today is either a conglomeration of historically unique nations or the descendant of one.

Africa, however, has experienced many challenges on the road to unity at both national and continental levels. In a book published 1947 as Nigerians began to move towards independence, the author wrote:

Nigeria is not a nation: It is a mere geographical expression. There are no "Nigerians" in the same sense as there are "English, Welsh or French". The word "Nigerian" is merely a distinctive appellation to distinguish those who live within the boundaries of Nigeria and those who do not. (Awolowo 1947: 47 – 48).

The author of those words was Obafemi Awolowo, a Yoruba leader based in southern Nigerian. Not long after his remarks, a prominent Northern Nigerian, Abubakar Tafawa Balewa (who would go on to become the country's first Federal Prime Minister), remarked, in 1948:

Since 1914 the British Government has been trying to make Nigeria into one country one country, but Nigerian people themselves are historically different in their background beliefs and customs and do not show themselves any sign of willingness to unite. Nigerian unity is only a British invention. (Ogundiya 2009: 285)

The problems of leadership produced by such legacies have led, for example, to the situation where Africa has produced half of today's world refugee population. The difficulties of unification should not be overestimated. Even if it is rare for countries to unite completely once they have become independent, and rarer still for regions and continents to do so, the goal of an integrated, prosperous, and peaceful African community analogous to the European Union remains, we believe, very much a possibility, and a project very much in progress.

The problems involved should not, also, be underestimated. The political union known as the nation-state presents problems of governance even when it is small (and smaller size does not guarantee automatic success). Such governance problems become even greater at the scale of an entire continent, especially one as diverse as Africa. Significantly, African integration has generally had a higher level of support among poorer, less developed, and smaller African countries versus richer, more developed, and larger African countries. The states of Eritrea, Ghana, Senegal, and Zimbabwe, have generally supported an African federation, but others, such as South Africa, Kenya, and Nigeria have been more sceptical, feeling that the continent is not ready for integration. Other countries with different feelings about Africa's unification are North African countries such as Algeria, Morocco, Egypt, Tunisia, and post-revolution

Libya. These states have traditionally identified themselves more with rival ideologies like Arab nationalism, Berber nationalism, and Islamism, and have shown decreasing interest in the idea of unification of Africa.

II. Heterogeneous Views on African Unity: Evidence of Indecisiveness?

This heterogeneity of views on African unity among African states seems inconsistent with what Kwame Nkrumah envisioned as the only appropriate future for Africa: one in which the entire continent would shelter under a common market, a single currency, an African Central bank, a common foreign policy, a common defence system and a common citizenship. Anything short of the above was, he held, a recipe for further exploitation and decadence, and could only produce a futureless people with hardly any potential for appreciable development comparable to that of the various European powers (Tshiyembe 2000).

The Organization of African Unity (OAU), sought to create unity and solidarity among African states, but was always divided between the Casablanca group, who followed Nkrumah's vision, and the Monrovia group, which opposed the Ghanaian leader's plan, and proposed instead the idea of a continent of cooperating nation-states (Adejo 2001: 129). The OAU did, at least, enable its member states to coordinate development and promote cooperation within the UN framework. Many of these tasks remain ingrained in the AU's mission, but the realization that it will not be possible to bring Africa together in one single political entity has led to a search for other options for the continent's unification. On September 9, 1999, the African Union (AU) was founded with a view to the acceleration of the process of integration within the continent. The goal, for the continent, was to play a more prominent role in the global economy whilst addressing social, economic and political problems.

This may have been a turn to alternative visions of African unity. Nkrumah had seen the struggle for Ghana's independence as part of the Pan-Africanist project. Ghana's republican constitution contained a clause showing Ghana's readiness to surrender its sovereignty for the interest of African unity. Julius Nyerere's passion for African unity, on the other hand, came from an altogether different origin. Nkrumah wanted unification immediately, but Nyerere wanted the process to go slowly and proceed gradually, until all the continent's countries were ready to unite. He favoured the idea of uniting countries into blocs, which could then form broader federations or some other form of regional integration. For him, the goal of unity was not an issue, only the timing of the processes leading to that unity.

Nkrumah's position was rooted in a systemic understanding of the political economy of imperialism and world capitalism) as he was described it in his work on neo-colonialism (1966). As he saw it, regional organizations and blocs would not only be an obstacle to continental unity but would become a pawn on the imperialist chess board (Shivji 2008: 237). Subsequent events proved Nkrumah right. On the fourth of August 1966 his government was overthrown by a CIA engineered coup (Shivji 2008: 279). To date Africa is still fragmented as it was during the colonial, and it remains economically dominated. The unification dreams are so far away. As one writer recently put it, even those African leaders who 'survived assassination or attempted *coup d'état* were still confronted with a new economic order that introduced a new kind of colonial bondage, one based on economic dependency rather than political subordination' (Kafumu 2018). History proved that Nkrumah was right: some four decades later none other than Nyerere himself admitted the failure of the first of African nationalist to achieve the Pan-African vision for which Africa now is being referred as poorer and weaker. Nyerere lamented the loss of that opportunity, saying that:

I rejected the glorification of the national state which we have inherited from colonialism and the artificial nations we are trying to forge from the inheritance. We are all Africans trying very hard to be Ghanaians or Tanzanians. Fortunately, for Africa we have not been suc-

cessful. The outside world hardly recognizes our Ghanaian-ness or Tanzanian-ness. What the outside world recognizes us is our African-ness. (Shivji 2008: 239)

Nyerere had tried to give others an example to copy by establishing the Union of Tanganyika and Zanzibar, from which the name Tanzania was derived. This only ended up creating political predicaments, one after another. Thus, it was copied by none. After the failure of older models of Pan-African unity, African leaders have come up with a new and different version, one that still aims at unity. So now what is AU's current vision of unity? "An integrated, prosperous and peaceful Africa, driven by its own citizens and representing a dynamic force in global arena" (Meredith 2005: 670). Has the AU been successful? The union has been effective in boosting cooperation and unity within Africa, putting its efforts towards diminishing conflict and boosting democracy. Africa is progressing not only in peace and security, but is also flourishing in areas such as culture; education; trade both within and outside the continent and continuing to place importance on the empowerment of women. A unifying Africa should not shy away from its heterogeneity¹; it should accept that its countries and peoples are different, and that it is from those differences that unity can come.

One political implication of this is federalism. Federalism in Africa does not have a positive image. Its record of success is patchy, and its failures seem huge. Currently there are only three established federal political systems among the 54 states in Africa: Nigeria, Ethiopia and South Africa. However, the evident paucity of successful contemporary federal systems should not be allowed to convey the impression that federalism in Africa is redundant. On the contrary, it continues to resonate as part of a continuing political discourse about the nature of political authority in many formally non-federal states, such as Somalia, Sudan, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Who among Africa's states will support unification? Levels of support for the goal, at the national level, appear to be inversely proportional to a nation's power and influence. Doubts have been raised about whether the goal of a unified Africa can ever be achieved while ongoing problems of conflict and poverty persist throughout the continent. Very few African people can deny the apparent difficulty that most African states have experienced in trying to establish democratic societies based on multi-party political systems of government and changes in government that are free of violence. African leaders and politicians themselves do recognize the fact that systems of democracy have failed to take root in many African countries. This failure is the root cause of the lack of security and peace in many countries. In spite of this, Western governments are putting pressure on their African counterparts to establish democratic political systems that will (they insist) produce good governance and a liberal economic system. In response to this pressure, many African leaders are struggling to establish political systems that will perpetuate them in power while still meeting the criteria of democratic governance.

To be a Tanzanian, a Ugandan, a Kenyan: these are all mere distinctions of geographical location and are not linked to language (vernacular), custom and culture. African countries have much in common despite their difference. The rise of nationalism was difficult for all the countries where it occurred. The difficulty lay in the problem of raising awareness of the need to join together among different peoples who had not, previously, anything in common. The first generation of nationalist leaders all enjoyed great prestige and high degrees of honour.

¹ Africa has 3000 distinct ethnic groups, 2000 languages, and is home to the most genetically diverse population on Earth. So diverse that two Africans are more genetically different from each other than a Chinese and a European are from each other. Africa is the world's second-largest and second-most-populous continent. It was assumed that ideology and class alliances would counter the potentially harmful effects of colonialism. In fact, it quickly became apparent that the political parties which were formed in most new states rarely represented more than one or two cultural groups. As different parties came to power, they ruled with their own group's interests coming first, plural societies did not develop. In an attempt to create the appearance of political unity, dominant groups began to ban, or make unconstitutional, other political parties.

They were seen to personify the states they led and swiftly took advantage to consolidate their control. From the outset most sought a monopoly of power; mostly established a system person rule and encourage personality cults: in the case of the latter, the essential claim was that the president was a personal embodiment of the whole nation, in a manner analogous to a monarch. If African leaders of that first generation could have decided to unite at an earlier point, the various challenges involved might have been more easily overcome: they did not and they were not, and the challenges remain.

III. Conclusion

Opponents of unification would presumably assert that national independence is the best (or only) way to overcome those challenges. Even if they are right, and there is no reason to call for a completely unified Africa, the principle of unification can still be applied in certain areas to ease tension and ameliorate conditions, such as those which are the legacies of colonial indifference in the drawing of borders. Neighbouring nations could – and, we believe, should – unite in order to tear down the borders that separate groups of people and allow them to resettle. Unification can bring forward improvements through sharing of resources and means to properly develop those resources. Frankly speaking, unification is a stronger and wiser choice. Absent of outside intervention, the way for Africa to improve itself is to throw away the attachment of the legacies of colonialism and unify at a regional level to reduce conflict, improve stability, overcome poverty increase standard of living, and reduce the loss of life to preventable illnesses and disease.

However, Africans should not deny that they are disunited, and that this is because there are those who can unite and those who cannot. Let those who can unite, let them unite in certain groups who can work together, and let those who cannot join this undertaking work together in other ways. Let us establish forms of unity which can work, even if they do not conform to the original model of Pan Africa Unity. From the time of the Atlantic Slave trade till the Berlin conference of 1884/5 and later there was constant African resistance to oppression. But these resistances grew out of very specific local conditions and had local cause, perspective and aspirations. The unification of countries has often come out of the reality of facing local causes: let us hope that recognition of shared problems at an African level can drive the unification of the continent as a whole.

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ПОМИМО ОБСУЖДЕНИЯ ВОПРОСА ОБ ОБЪЕДИНЕНИИ АФРИКАНСКИХ СТРАН: ПОЧЕМУ ПАНАФРИКАНСКОЕ ЕДИНСТВО ВСЕ ЕЩЕ ОСТАЕТСЯ ДАЛЕКОЙ МЕЧТОЙ?

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Аннотация. Идея объединения Африки не должна быть с легкостью отвергнута. Однако этот план вызвал серьезные трудности для тех, кто стремится его реализовать. Данная идея, разработанная африканской диаспорой, была развита такими деятелями, как Кваме Нкрума и Джулиус Ньерере. В первые десятилетия своего существования проект африканского единства был институционализирован в Организации африканского единства. ОАЕ пережила множество перемен и всегда была теоретическим и политическим полем битвы, разделенным между теми, кто хотел стремительного и скорого объединения африканских государств, и теми, кто выступал за более осторожные подходы. В период, когда ОАЕ уступила место Африканскому союзу, авторы горячо призывают к продолжению процесса объединения в будущем, пусть даже более умеренному и в большей степени учитывающему сложности многоликого континента.

Ключевые слова: панафриканизм, единство, ограбление, коррупция

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