

PROBING THE PHENOMENA OF “AFRICAN UNITY” AS THE PILLAR OF THE AFRICAN UNION

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ABSTRACT

The dawn of the 21st century has witnessed the transformation of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) into the African Union (AU). Thabo Mbeki and other pioneers of this transformation were concerned about the failure of the OAU to adapt to the changes in the international system. They saw an urgent need for Africa's continental body to shed its image of being seen internationally as the “dictator's club”. As such, they envisaged that the newly born AU would elevate the promotion of unity and solidarity among African states from a political rhetoric into a principled action. It was also hoped that AU would tap into its unity and solidarity for the purpose of harnessing the notion of “African solutions for African problems”. It appears that since the pioneers of the AU's transformation have left the presidency of their countries (South Africa, Nigeria and Burkina Faso), the AU is regressing towards the culture of the defunct OAU. If the response of the AU to the 2011 crisis in Libya and the circumstances leading to the election of Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma as the AU Commission Chairperson is anything to go by, it is safe to state that “African Unity” remains a farfetched dream. Against this background, this Afrocentric article uses discourse approach and document analysis in their broadest form to examine the road navigated by the AU to bring about “African Unity”.

Keywords: African Union, AU Commission, African Unity, Organisation of African Unity

1. INTRODUCTION

The post independent Africa saw the promotion of regional and continental integration through the formation of both economic and political institutions. The formation of the OAU in 1963 was the result of the awareness amongst the newly independent African states that their integration and self-reliance would be the foundation to counter dependence on former colonial powers such as Britain, France, Portugal and Belgium. African identity became an element of consciousness to ensure that colonialism does not repeat itself (Peppetta, 2010). Consequently, OAU was underpinned by the tenets of African identity, decolonisation

and the membership in the international society (Twinomugisha, 2013). Its charter called for transcendence of ethnic and national differences and respect of sovereignty and the territorial integrity of other states and for their right to self-determination. Therefore the main purpose of the OAU was to ensure that African states are liberated from all forms of colonialism. This institution was to guarantee that Africans became the owners and drivers of their own natural resources, economic and political development. Moreover, this main body was to maintain peace, security and protection for the sovereignty of its member states (Peppetta, 2010). However, 30 years down the line, the relevance of the OAU begun to be questioned. It is within this context that the year 1991 witnessed Muammar Gaddafi's proposal to reform the OAU (Twinomugisha, 2013). This proposal ignited the debate that later prevailed the birth of the AU in the year 2001. In other words, the AU succeeded the OAU as the continental body for the African states. It is worth noting that the metamorphosis of the OAU into the AU was mainly advocated by South Africa, Libya and Nigeria. The idea behind the transformation of the OAU into the AU was partly driven by the African leaders' common understanding that the former had outlived its mission and vision. This is to say that with the introduction of majority rule in South Africa in the 1990s, the OAU was considered to have achieved its historic mission.

As such, there was an urgent need for a reformed continental body, with a new focus on the developing a robust socio-economic and development agenda for Africa. Although Gaddafi immediately envisioned for the United States of Africa (USA), Thabo Mbeki (the then South African President) envisioned for a more gradual approach that would start with the consolidation of regional cooperation frameworks such as the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). The latter model of integration was influenced by the belief in certain circles that regional integration is a prerequisite for continental integration (Williams, 2007).

Nevertheless, the AU became the main continental body in Africa; with regional bodies such as SADC and ECOWAS as its building blocks. It was hoped that the AU will effect meaningful promotion of unity and solidarity in the continent. It is against this background that this article draws from Afrocentricity as propagated by Asante (2003) to analyse the capacity of the AU in the realisation of the envisioned "African unity". Apart from the negatively viewed response of AU towards the Libyan crises in 2011, South Africa's vote of the Resolution 1973 serves as the litmus test for contextualising the overall objective of this article (Matheba, 2011). This is based on the fact that both South Africa and Libya spearheaded the trans-

formation of the OAU to the AU. The foregoing analysis highlights that the two countries along with Nigeria had common vision and a fathomable diversion by any of them is worth probed.

2. THE CONTEXT AND RELEVANCE OF THE AU TOWARDS THE AFRICAN AGENDA

Hengari and Turianskyi (2014) is of the view that due to the adherence to the principles of sovereignty and non-interference in the internal affairs of member states, the OAU has failed to contribute to peace and stability and people centred development. These led to critics that the OAU was failing or unwilling to condemn its member states. Therefore, it was predicated to be fast declining into the "old boys club". This position implies that the tendency of the leaders of Africa's liberation movements-cum-ruling parties to shield each other in the midst of social and economic injustice and at the expense of the masses of they ought to serve. It is against this backdrop that the transformation of the OAU into the AU in the year 2001 had carried hopes for good governance among the African masses. The establishment of Peace and Security Council (PSC) in the year 2004 provided the AU with essential peace and security architecture (Qobo, 2007). Of most importance, according to the Constitutive Act of 2001 (as cited by Ikome, 2007), the AU developed several norms that forge for the promotion of culture for peace, security and stability.

These include sovereignty, equality of member states; condemnation of unconstitutional changes of government and intervene in the member state where there are grave circumstances (Maake, 2009). The combination of all of the above steps by the AU was geared towards the realisation of the African leaders' quest to find "African solutions for African Problems".

Flowing from the above, there are perceptions that the AU has been successful since its establishment (Hengari & Turianskyi, 2014). In relation to this, Hengari and Turianskyi (2014) argue that "If there were over 70 successful coup d'états during the OAU's tenure, only a paltry 12 occurred since the establishment of the AU. This extrapolation suggests that the AU instruments such as the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM), "including norms that have been adopted relating to governance, human rights and democracy have gained traction and started to bear fruit" (Hengari & Turianskyi, 2014). According to Mouzayian (2014) the APRM is a voluntary assessment tool instituted by African heads of state in 2003, to promote good governance and sustainable development on the continent. Most importantly it does this in participating states by deepening the principles of democracy, transparency, accountability, integrity and respect for human rights amongst others. It is against the above sentiments and principles of the APRM that the article-

begs to differ by virtue of that, if the mechanism was successful, African States would not be struggling with good governance in their own self. Literature points that out of the participating states of APRM, some such as South Africa, Nigeria, Ghana, Rwanda, Kenya, Algeria and Benin, do not show improvement and therefore not really motivating to non-participating states (Qobo, 2007; Peppetta, 2010).

For instance, if it is not a campaign against heads of states (Jacob Zuma's case in South Africa); it is a complaint about rigged elections (claims in Kenya 2013 elections) Mouzayian (2014). The article comprehends that perhaps the problem lies on the fact that the mechanism is voluntarily and therefore not really binding. These cause a divide and erode the vision of African unity. This is because the mechanism as it states, only deepens the principles of democracy, transparency, accountability, integrity and respect for human rights with "participating states". Implying that authoritarian states such as Libya and Zimbabwe are not necessarily bound by the APRM and therefore no review would serve as an aid towards a continental mission of common governance (Raphala, 2013).

3. CONDEMNATION OF UNCONSTITUTIONAL CHANGE OF GOVERNMENT

According to Sturman (2012), Gaddafi's role in pushing the AU reform had ulterior motives of se-

curing his regime and ultimately, elevating it to the continental status. Hence, his authoritarian regime was against the AU principles of democracy and respect for human rights as articulated in article 4(h) of Constitutive Act of AU 2001. Sturman (2012) further argues that in 2003, Gaddafi convinced the AU Assembly to adopt the Amendment of article 4(h) of the AU Act, to extend to the right of AU to intervene in the cases of serious threat to legitimate order. The undertaking here is that this threat to legitimate order is actually the rebels against his regime and therefore the legitimacy of that order. On an opposing view, the uprisings in Libya caused a division within the AU as some perceived the campaign against Gaddafi as unconstitutional removal of government and therefore should be condemned since constitutional removal only happens through elections (Twinomugisha, 2013). However, it should be understood that the above contested AU principle was meant for challenges directed only to democratically elected governments. Therefore, such arguments may be discarded since the regime change riots were evidently against an authoritarian regime. Since 1969 when Gaddafi came into power, Libya has never had any general elections. Therefore, as compared to its North Africa counterparts such as Egypt where the rebels had a strong army that consequently overthrew President Hosni Mubarak, it cannot qualify as unconstitutional removal of gov-

ernment. In this vein, it is this article's conviction that the division in the approach of the AU during the year 2011's Arab spring in relation to the North African crisis highlights the need for AU PSC to clarify as when and why the civilian led uprising against a head of state should not be defined as an 'unconstitutional change of government'.

In the light of the above analysis, this article submits that there is struggle to agree on what is "common". This "common solution" is a key denominator for the united Africa. Contextually, Corrigan (2011) points that there is no clear answer in terms of what is "common". He highlights that the problem is that what may be necessary for one country may not be the case for the other. Therefore, this situation hinders the necessity of "urgency" that requires integrated inputs. Even though most African states may share common parallels due to the fact that they were once colonised, countries do not have common problems that need common solutions. However, each can learn from the other's problems and solutions (Shai, 2016). For instance, the dislocation caused by Rwanda's 1994 genocide may not have a direct parallel in another country. But the problems may be 'common' to the extent that other countries have had to deal with other 'dislocation' issues such as migration and refugees.

Gazing from the Libyan situation in the recent past, it is safe to posit

that the AU response to Gaddafi's war to stay in power contrast with the rejection of coups d'etat. The foregoing analysis is influenced by the impressive evidence that the AU has acted decisively in Mali, Niger and Madagascar in order to maintain its principle of reject of unconstitutional change of government (Twinomugisha, 2013). However, in the case of Libya a divergence from the principle of state sovereignty and non-interference in the internal affairs is observable. This can be explained in the fact that, although Africa is making inroads in terms of becoming a democratic continent, there are still several states that are undemocratic, but they are represented in the AU Assembly. These countries include Swaziland and Cameroon, among others (Raphala, 2013; Maleka, 2014). Therefore, they are threatened by this popularisation of democracy in Africa and the international community (Shai & Iroanya, 2014). Contrasting governance values that prevail within Africa certainly contradict with the commitment to democracy, constitutionalism and human rights as professed by the AU. This is highlighted by Corrigan (2015) when he writes that AU incorporates states ranging from the freest on the earth to the most repressive. For instance, out the 54 states in the continent, 11 are rated to be free, 18 are partially free, and 25 are not free (Mouzayian, 2014). Therefore, it breeds doubts for continental order amid the divergence of continental countries.

There were mixed emotions amongst African leaders about how the Libyan crisis was handled. Firstly, some African leaders such as then Prime Minister of Kenya Raila Odinga, questioned the acceptance of Libyan membership under the authoritarian leader Gaddafi. He argued that "in terms of the AU Constitutive Act, Article 3(g), one of the objectives of the Union shall be to promote democratic principles and institutions, popular participation and good governance" (Olali, 2011). According to Odinga, Libyan government was against this objective and by that it was supposed to be side-lined from the AU. He further stated that "African Unity must be based on the common position on the issues of interest to the continent and its people" (Olali, 2011:06). This article shares the same sentiment with Odinga on his analysis on the issue of Libya, because the first leadership that the AU should have provided was to ensure that all its member states adhere to its founding principles and objectives. The failure to do that will ultimately cause many problems. For example, currently the Kingdom of Swaziland is the member of the AU in good standing and Swaziland government does not adhere to objective no (g) on the article 3 in the Constitutive Act of the AU which is to promote democratic principles and institutions, popular participation and good governance (African Union, 2001). Such situations need to be addressed as soon as possible because they have

the potential to cause problems in future. The AU must be honest to itself and compel its member states to adhere to its founding principles and objectives. The reality is that there is more likelihood of seeing what happened in Libya happening in Swaziland in future. So what is the AU doing in order to prevent that? Because prevention is better than dealing with the real problem.

Some African leaders such as the President of Zimbabwe (Robert Mugabe) blame the western forces for threatening African Unity. These forces are accused of perpetuating the selfish agenda of Western countries by perpetuating divisions among the Africans and African states. In consideration of this backdrop, Mugabe and like-minded African statesmen often exploit the anti-colonial rhetoric to undermine the legitimate struggles of the masses of the countries that they lead. Mugabe goes to an extent of accusing some African leaders for dining and wining with the western forces at the expense of African people (Kimenyi, 2014). He accuses them of putting their narrow selfish interests first. Some scholars such as Owuochi (2013) have also made contribution to the debate when he stated that "the AU has failed to follow Dr Kwame Nkrumah's vision of an African continent which enjoys autonomy and sovereignty in both material and intellectual terms. The AU and its member states have abdicated their intellectual and ideological

responsibilities to Western donors and to Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) funded by the same donors" (Olali, 2011:07). In relation to foregoing analysis, it is argued that external interests are at the lead of reversing the little gains that have been made by the African individuals and organisations insofar as the realisation of African Unity is concerned. This position does not in any way apportion whole innocence on the part of Africans and their institutions for the slow progress towards African Unity.

The former AU Commission chairperson Jean Ping, argues that "the case of AU's intervention in Libya is a classic example of how African efforts to solve the continent's challenges go unreported or are twisted to suit a hostile agenda" (Ping, 2011). He further stated that, African issues have long suffered from either a lack of exposure in the mainstream media, marginalisation and misrepresentation or from outright silencing (Ping, 2011). The biased reporting that puts emphasis on the negativities about Africa and not the positive stories should be understood within the context that most of the international media is owned by companies from the West. As such, the editorial decisions of these media platforms are often channelled to suit the foreign policy agenda of their countries. Flowing from the above, the question remains that; did the AU do enough to contribute to the attainment of the overall AU objective of consolidating

democracy in the continent? For the authors of this article, the AU measures for promoting good governance in the continent are commendable, but obviously the challenges abound.

4. THE ELECTION OF NKOSAZANA DLAMINI-ZUMA AS THE CHAIRPERSON OF AU COMMISSION

In January 2012, Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma was elected as the chairperson of the AU Commission which opened a huge debate about the issue of the AU leadership. The issue of leadership is at the heart of the effectiveness of the AU and is particularly timely given that the Assembly of Heads of State will elect the Chairperson of the AU Commission in the near future. Hence, the term of office for the current chairperson is coming to an end and she (Dlamini-Zuma) has indicated that she is not available to serve another term. Regardless of this, it is important to note that the 2012 elections of the chairperson of the AU Commission were highly contested by the incumbent Jean Ping (Gabone) and Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma (South African). This election divided the African continent into two groups, those who support Jean Ping and those who support Dlamini-Zuma. The election of Dlamini-Zuma left the camp of Ping bitter and as the defeated group. The emerging of two camps on the race to the leadership of AU exposed the African continent to external forces. The external forces saw the African

continent as one divided continent. The fierce struggle for power was against the founding principle of the AU. The main priority of the AU is to unite African states. Unfortunately the election of the leadership of the AU was now used to divide the African states. Some leaders such as Ping, went to an extent of accusing South Africa as the country that needs to dominate continental politics. Certain African states did not want to accept the election of Dlamini-Zuma as the new leader of the AU. Such conducts make it safe to state that "African Unity" remain a farfetched dream. The rejection of her election was based on regionalism and squabbles that will only contribute in dragging the continent backwards. Despite this, it is worth noting the division of Africa over the question of the leadership of the AU Commission was fuelled by the fact that western countries such as France had interests on the outcome of this election. The foregoing narrative should be understood within the context of the desperate need of the big powers such as France and the United States of America (USA) to [ab]use established international organisations such as the AU and UN as the instruments to promote and entrench their national interests (Matheba, 2012).

It is the well-considered view of this article that, for the African states to excel in achieving African Unity there is a need to put the end on the issue of regionalism and national chauvinism. Afri-

cans need to learn to trust each other irrespective of their national or regional differences. If one African is given the responsibility to drive the African agenda, it is important for him/ her to be given a chance, space and support to do so. In other words, a judgement on a leader must not be based on regionalism, but on the leadership qualities that one has been portraying in his/her previous and current leadership responsibilities. Central to the weakness of the Africans is the propensity to allow external forces to infiltrate Africa and take decisions on its behalf; either directly or indirectly. Most African leaders are captured; they continue to champion the interest of external forces at the expense of African people. Such instances continue to compromise African Unity, because external forces become happy when there is a division amongst African states. They use such divisions on their advantage to fulfil their narrowish and selfish interests at the expense of African people. The 2012 elections of the leadership of AU has exposed African continent to the world. It proved without reasonable doubt that African Unity remains a farfetched dream.

5. DECONSTRUCTING THE NOTION THAT AU IS EQUIVALENT TO OAU WITHOUT THE "O"

The AU has proved several times that, it failed to stand for what it has been established for. The AU has failed to prove itself that it is not the same old OAU, which was well-known for its inability to deal

with real problems facing the continent. For example in 2014, the continent was faced by the crisis of Ebola. But how the AU handled this crisis was not convincing and encouraging. A popular African newspaper carried an opinion piece entitled, "Where is Africa?" (Ndemo, 2014). This question was in reference to the fact that the AU which was expected by many Africans to lead the efforts against the epidemic was missing in action. The author suggested that the AU should have immediately called for an "Ebola Summit" to discuss the crisis and find ways to effectively deal with it. Instead, the AU was absent and left the job to governments and organizations from outside the continent (Kimenyi, 2015). The "wait and see" attitude on the part of the AU support the fact that its inability to act on issues that are facing the African continent opens a vacuum to foreign states to capitalise on that and step in to fill such a vacuum (Vines, 2013). The external forces fills the vacuum by absorbing most African states to rely on them as donor sponsorship and also formulate institutions which turn out to represent them and be African by names (Vines, 2013).

The following analogy captures the depth of the AU's dilemma. That is, if you are a man and you have a family and every time when your family has a problem, the next door man comes in and resolves problems on your behalf; then you must know that, you are in a very serious problem. Firstly,

your family will lose confidence in you and gain confidence from a man next door. Secondly, your family will perceive you as one useless man, because you do not have a meaningful role to play in their life. The point here is that, if the AU in many cases fails to intervene in many wanting cases, then its affiliated member states will lose confidence on it. They will also perceive it as being a useless Union and the external forces that always come in when the member states are faced with problems will be cherished by the member states. If African states start cherishing the external forces, it means there is a very serious problem and this misnomer would prevail the crisis of relevance for the AU. Regardless of the merits of the above analysis, this authors' alternative view is that the AU's challenges must not be seen in isolation. Like other international organisations, the AU is nothing more than its constituent parts. For it to be successful in enforcing African Unity and taping into it to find continental problems, it is necessary for political and socio-economic changes within its member states and their respective regions to be given due attention without any fear or favour.

At other times, the AU has been willing to act, but has been too slow in taking action. Besides addressing crises, the AU is also charged with the responsibility of coordinating continent-wide development efforts and serving as the voice of Africans in matters

of global governance (Kimenyi, 2015). The AU has the responsibility to tackle the most pressing issues on the continent including accelerating “the political and socio-economic integration of the continent;” helping “promote and defend African common positions on issues of interest to the continent and its peoples;” promoting “democratic principles and institutions, popular participation and governance;” and promoting “peace, security, and stability on the continent” calls for the participation of a supranational organization such as the African Union (African Union, 2001). But based on its progress, it is safe to state that the AU is either not willing or not capable of carrying out its objectives effectively (Carin, 2014).

For a continent that is comprised of 54 countries which vary widely in terms of land size, population, ethnic and religious diversity, and levels of development, the organization that is expected to serve as the primary centralised coordinating institution in uniting Africans and advancing their joint welfare and also enhancing their peaceful co-existence must be the one that fully understands the various problems that currently confront the required policies and also has the legal authority to do so (Kimenyi, 2015). Of course, the AU cannot function effectively if it is riddled by incompetence, limited resources, corruption and other bureaucratic inefficiencies. Thus, the key to making the AU a successful instrument and powerful

voice is reconstructing and reconstituting both the institution and its organs so as to create a political and bureaucratic institution that functions according to the rule of law and serves as a true representative of the wishes and aspirations of the broad cross-section of African people (Nolan, 2013). It is only such an efficiently run organisation that can deal effectively with various problems that are currently facing the continent.

6. REGIONAL INTEGRATION AS A FORCE TO AFRICAN UNITY

The AU is expected to spearhead the continent's regional integration effort and help provide viable regional integration units, which could serve as mechanisms for co-operation in investment, provision of infrastructure, management of the environment, and growth and development (Carin, 2014). Unfortunately, in reality, it is unlikely that the proposed Continental Free Trade Area (CFTA) a carry-over from the Abuja Treaty will be realised by 2016 or any time soon because a large number of issues at the regional economic level of Africans, are Africa-specific (and hence, are unlikely to be lobbied for by other countries), and are least likely to be rejected (Carin 2014). The slow progress towards the regional integration amongst African states contributes to the failure of the AU to improve the socio-economic and political relations of African states (Murithi, 2013). In concurrence with the popular adage that “charity begins at home”, the AU must open

a platform for inter-trade amongst African states and also develop a mechanism that will ensure that African states prioritise to assist each other before external forces come in. For example, the formation of economic associations like BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) should have been modelled and experimented amongst African states before Pretoria can “look East” (Nkadi-meng, 2016).

7. PEACE AND SECURITY AS A FORCE TO ACHIEVE AFRICAN UNITY

Africa still suffers from violent mobilization by various ethnic and religious groups (Mpe, 2016). This is the case in spite the fact that, unlike the OAU, the AU has the mandate to intervene in these crises (Kimenyi, 2015). But it has been unable to deal directly with this violence, as seen in intractable civil conflicts in the Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and South Sudan, as well as the increasing threat of terrorism by groups such as Boko Haram, al-Shabab, the Lord’s Resistance Army, and al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) (Ndemo, 2014; Mpe, 2016; Shai, 2016). Although there have been some notable successes such as in the case of Somalia. In many respects, it has been stated before; the AU has either been extremely slow to intervene in various conflicts in the continent or has done so ineffectively. The launch of the African Standby Force (ASF) has already been delayed several times, even though

it was expected to have been established and made operational by 2010 but largely due to limited resources from the member countries the targeted time frame was not reached (Dersso, 2014).

8. CONCLUSION

This article has mainly relied on document study to probe the principle of “African Unity” as a pillar of the AU. Parallel to the *problematique* of this article is the fact that previous studies on this subject have either aligned themselves to the neo-colonial discourse or the anti-colonial rhetoric. As such, this article sought to bridge the widening gap between these two discourses in order to deconstruct an alternative Afrocentric perspective. Based on selected test cases, this article has confirmed that African Unity is essential if the developmental and socio-economic agenda of the AU is to be successful. Unfortunately, the major finding of this study is that; due to both internal pitfalls and their exacerbation by Western interests; it appears that the African unity remains a far-fetched dream. This dilemma is worsened by the fact that the champions of the transformation of the OAU to AU have since left the presidencies of their countries and therefore have limited opportunity (if there is any) in shaping the agenda of the AU. In addition to the slow pace of regional integration, there is also an element of mistrust between leaders from different regions in the continent. Above all, there is no gainsaying

that the complexity and multiplicity of domestic challenges facing the regional powers of Africa such as South Africa and Nigeria are making it difficult for their leaders to pay adequate attention to African affairs and international relations as a whole.

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