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THE ORGANISATION OF AFRICAN UNITY : THE CRISIS COMES AT LAST?

The Organisation of African Unity (OAU) was scheduled to hold its 20th Summit Meeting in Conakry (Capital of Guinea) in May. However, the death of President Sekou Toure of Guinea in March and the subsequent coup in Guinea raises some doubts about whether the annual gathering of African Heads of State will take place. Should it be impossible to hold this meeting, it would plunge the OAU into a deep crisis.

This Brief Report discusses some of the background to the OAU, analyzes the contemporary scene and speculates on the future of the OAU. Finally, it considers some implications for the OAU of recent developments in southern Africa.

A. BACKGROUND

Established in Addis Ababa in May 1963 at a meeting of 31 independent states, the OAU was the fulfillment of the Pan-Africanist ideal. The Addis meeting brought together three rival political groupings, each of which envisioned a different type of African unity. These groups were: the five-member Casablanca group, considered at the time to be radical; the Monrovia group (chiefly Anglophone), considered at the time to be moderate; and a Francophone group, unofficially called the Brazzaville Twelve, which were closely allied to Paris.

The anvil upon which African unity was forged was fundamentally opposition to colonialism and the "White South". This opposition formed the basis of an historic compromise between the three factions, credit for which is given to the Algerian leader, Ben Bella. He called upon African states to "die a little, so that the peoples still under colonial domination may be free, and African unity may not be a vain word."

The OAU has largely set the rules for the conduct of inter-state relations in Africa. This is particularly so with regard to the twin problems of irredentism and border disputes. The particular primacy of these two problems was endorsed through the adoption of a special resolution at the 1964 Cairo Summit, which declared "special respect" for boundaries inherited at independence. The question of borders has been a major problem in generating African disputes, and the OAU's iron rule in this regard has prevented the solution of many African problems.

B. THE CONTEMPORARY SCENE

There are currently two substantial political problems, with their roots in the border issue, which face the OAU. The first is the issue of Western Sahara, which is claimed by Morocco. This claim is, however, contested by the Polisario Front which, as early as 1976, set up a government in exile called the Saharan Arab Democratic Republic (SADR). In 1980, 26 African countries had recognised the Polisario and pressed for its OAU membership. This sparked a major crisis in the OAU, and the conflict over the Western Sahara still remains.

The second question concerns the recognition of a contested government in Chad. The contending claimants, Goukouni and Habré, were supported by competing factions inside the Organisation (see Brief Report no. 44).

This issue and the Western Sahara question completely paralyzed the Organisation in 1982, and two attempts to hold the 19th Summit in Tripoli failed. While on the surface the political questions hamstrung the OAU, at that time the claim to the leadership of the OAU by Colonel Muammar Gaddafi in 1981 was probably the root cause for that crisis. The crisis lasted for 12 months and was only resolved when Gaddafi gave up his claim to the leadership.

At the meeting of the OAU in Addis Ababa in June 1983 the participants papered over the divisions in the Organisation and gave the Chairmanship of the OAU to Colonel Mengistu of Ethiopia. At that meeting it was hoped that a new era of co-operation in the Organisation would be forthcoming.

One authoritative voice argued that the Addis Conference "had a remarkable healing effect and, although the problems have largely been put on the shelf rather than solved, the re-assertion of the primacy of the continent over its individual problems was a welcome sign that hopefully has been exerting its own influence. There were in Addis Ababa enough leaders ready to realise that the OAU was worth saving". (West Africa, London, 23 January 1983).

Much of this renewed optimism pivoted around the fact that Guinea's President Sekou Toure was to become the Organisation's next Chairman, after the 20th meeting of Heads of Government was held in Guinea. Sekou Toure himself had spent considerable energy, prior to his death, to assure African leaders of his good intentions.

More especially, Sekou Toure's symbolic link with the 1963 Addis Ababa meeting would have provided a legitimacy and a continuity for the Organisation. Therefore, his death has left a clear vacuum in the leadership of the OAU. The coup in Guinea, which followed four days after Sekou Toure's death, also raises some doubts whether a meeting can take place in Conakry at all.

These important issues aside, the OAU is itself in considerable financial debt. While the Ministers meeting recently proposed an annual budget of \$25,3 million for the Organisation's services in '84/'85, less than 60% of the contributions are normally made. The OAU's Interim Secretary said that some countries had not made a contribution to the OAU coffers since 1970. Such financial constraints have an obvious debilitating effect on the Organisation's capacity to fulfill its intended role. There is, however, an obvious political problem in punishing financial delinquency for fear that those, so punished, would turn their backs on the Organisation.

C. SOUTHERN AFRICA

The recent initiatives by the South African Government at reaching an accord with Mozambique and a disengagement agreement with Angola have provided specific and immediate problems for the OAU.

After initially questioning Mozambique's attitude, a meeting of OAU Foreign Ministers began to moderate their initial hostile stance. The basis of their revised position was similar to a 1969 decision which argued that southern African states often had no choice but to co-operate with the Republic. In that particular context, Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland were given OAU sanction to have commercial and trade ties with the Republic. The OAU position on Nkomati was that Mozambique in particular had been driven to the accord, and the Nigerian Foreign Minister stated a position which was widely echoed elsewhere in the OAU: "We understand the need and the right of any sovereign regime to reach accommodation with whomever poses a threat to their national security, integrity, and existence." This position is likely to become the official OAU position on the question of ties between South Africa and other southern African states should the issue arise at a future OAU Summit Meeting.

The Namibian question and the disengagement agreement with Angola also present specific problems to the OAU. It seems unlikely that an OAU Summit Meeting would want to stymie any effort by an African country to reach a settlement. In any case, the Namibian issue has not prominently featured in the OAU, primarily because responsibility for Namibia and its future has resided in the United Nations.

Should an OAU meeting take place, therefore, the question of South Africa is unlikely to feature prominently, unless the Organisation is forced to invoke its hostility to racism in an effort to save the Organisation.