

Governing regionalism in Africa:
themes and debates

Gilbert M. Khadiagala

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Centre for Policy Studies
6 Sturdee Avenue
Rosebank
Johannesburg, South Africa
Email: portia@cps.org.za

P O Box 1933
Parklands
Johannesburg, 2121

Tel (011) 442-2666
Fax (011) 442-2677

www.cps.org.za

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Introduction

Regionalism is the process of building multilateral institutions to enhance political, security, and economic interaction among states

Regionalism is the process of building multilateral institutions to enhance political, security, and economic interaction among states. Around the world, regionalism has been built on the foundations of functional states, at the same time striving to transcend them. Thus while states are the locus of regionalism, regionalism often seeks to overcome the deficiencies of states by erecting mechanisms that diminish the states' salience.¹ This paradox relates to a number of critical dimensions of states and regionalism. The first is the question of timing. Historically, regionalism has advanced only through contested processes where states learn to cede sovereignty over long periods of interactions across a wide range of domains, in particular the functional sphere of economic co-operation. Secondly, regionalism grows out of strong, not weak, states with equally long experience in harnessing the gains from sovereignty. Thirdly, the leadership of strong states (often hegemonic leaders) is frequently pertinent in setting the rules that jumpstart regionalism.

How do these themes resonate in Africa, where the governance of regional institutions remains enigmatic? What has been the dominant African practice of reconciling the imperatives of statehood with subcontracting roles to regional institutions? How have debates about African regional institution-building changed over the years, and what are the lessons we could derive from historical experiences? This essay briefly considers these issues as it reflects on efforts to govern African regionalism.

Framing African regionalism

Since the 1960s, Africa has confronted a crisis of regionalism that has stemmed from the tension between continentalism and sub-regionalism. This tension resulted inevitably from Africa's geographical vastness, but more importantly, from the distinction between the political logic that drove continentalism and the promise of economic integration that informed sub-regionalism. In addition to the novelty of independence, the contest between political and economic imperatives has shaped diverse debates about the modalities and institutions for regionalism. Briefly, on the eve of the formation of the Organization of African Unity (OAU), African states resolved the divisive debates about continentalism and sub-regionalism by creating the grand compromise captured in the OAU. Since the mid-1970s sub-regional organisations such as the Economic Community of West

¹ For wide-ranging discussions on regionalism see Andrew Hurrell, Regionalism in theoretical perspective, in Louis Fawcett and Andrew Hurrell (eds) *Regionalism in World Politics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995; Hurrell, Explaining the resurgence of regionalism in world politics, *Review of International Studies*, 21, 4, October 1995.

African States (ECOWAS), the East African Community (EAC), the Inter-Governmental Authority on Development (IGAD), and the Southern African Development Community (SADC) evolved to articulate the economic component of regionalism that also drew on geographical proximities and shared values.²

Over three decades of African regionalism, an uneasy but tolerable division of labour arose between continentalism and sub-regionalism, typified in the co-existence of the OAU and sub-regional economic schemes. Yet this tension was never adequately resolved, precisely because of attempts by some African states to foist an economic agenda on the continental political architecture. Thus from the Lagos Plan of Action in 1980, there was a new momentum to construct a continental African Economic Community (AEC), an idea that gained further elaboration in the Treaty Establishing the African Economic Community, the Abuja Treaty of 1991. On paper, the Abuja Treaty came into force in May 1994, with protocols specifying a gradual process that would be achieved by co-ordination, harmonisation and progressive integration of the activities of existing and future Regional Economic Communities (RECs) over 34 years.³ Apart from ECOWAS and SADC, the other RECs identified included the Arab Maghreb Union (AMU); Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS); the Common Market of Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA) and the Southern African Development Community (SADC). Although purportedly seeking to build the AEC on the existing structures of sub-regionalism, the stark reality was that these institutions were in themselves still relatively young and too inchoate to fulfil what was essentially a political mandate by 2028. Like the Lagos Plan, the Abuja Treaty revealed that the grandiose intentions of continental institution-builders would continue to defy the logic on the ground.⁴ If the sub-regions were taking much longer to create sustainable institutions, would it not have made sense to have longer time frames for continental integration than those envisaged by the planners at Lagos and Abuja?

Over the last three decades of African regionalism, an uneasy but tolerable division of labour arose between continentalism and sub-regionalism

The 1990s added a new layer of complexity to the continentalism versus sub-regionalism debates that are still resonating today. With the growth of failed states, sub-regional institutions began to assume new security and intervention roles as peace-keepers and peace-builders. Starting with the ECOMOG experiment in Liberia and Sierra Leone, the stage was set for regional economic institutions becoming fire brigades, roles that they were unprepared for.⁵ But, over time,

² Colin Legum, The organization of African unity - success or failure? *International Affairs* 51, 2, 1975; David B. Meyers, Intra-regional conflict management by the organization of African unity, *International Organization* 28, 3, 1974.

³ The Treaty Establishing the African Economic Community. Addis Ababa: The OAU, May 1994.

⁴ For critical analyses of the Lagos Plan and Abuja Treaty see John Ravenhill, "Collective Self-Reliance or Collective Self-Delusion: Is the Lagos Plan of Action a Viable Alternative?" *Africa in Economic Crisis*, ed. John Ravenhill. New York: Columbia, 1986 pp. 85-107.

⁵ Amos Sawyer, Violent conflicts and governance challenges in West Africa: the case of the Mano River Basin area, *Journal of Modern African Studies* 42, 3, 2004; and Adekeye Abebajo, *Building Peace in West Africa: Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Guinea Bissau*. Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2002.

with tenacity, patience, and international support, ECOWAS emerged as a model sub-regional organisation with the capacity to create broad-based security architecture for West Africa. The ECOWAS model, in addition to conflicts elsewhere in Africa, also forced donors to embark on long-term strategies of capacity building for security in other African sub-regions, witnessed in multifaceted programmes such as the African Crisis Response Initiative (ACRI), Reinforcement of African Peacekeeping Capability (RECAMP), African Contingency Operation and Technical Assistance (ACOTA) and others.⁶ In more recent years, anti-terrorism initiatives have been added to the growing list of mandates for sub-regional organisations.

The escalation of security and political mandates of sub-regional organisations inevitably watered down their principal priorities, despite the real need to sequence security and economic priorities. But this escalation also coincided with profound debates about the future of the OAU, debates that reflected questions of managing state weaknesses and sub-regional insecurities. From 1993, through the Cairo Mechanisms of Conflict Management, Prevention, and Resolution, the OAU tried to reinvent itself as a robust organisation, loosening the strictures of sovereignty, and sought to become a more interventionist body to meet the challenges of state collapse. More critical, however, was that these initiatives came too late to save the OAU, particularly since sub-regional organisations had already assumed the larger political and security mandates that had been the preserve of the continental organisation.

***Leadership has always
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building in Africa***

With the precipitous decline in attendance at OAU meetings, a bold move was required to save the organisation; this feat was accomplished when Libyan leader, Muamar Gaddafi stepped in to reinvigorate the continental dream that Kwame Nkrumah had articulated in the 1960s⁷. Leadership has always been important in continental and sub-regional institution-building in Africa. The comparison between Gaddafi and Nkrumah is apt: continental leadership has often stemmed from Messianic-type leaders, those ready to defy the constraints of resources, culture, colonial legacies, and geography in propounding grandiose continental visions. Sub-regional leadership has, on the other hand, been more introspective, modest, gradualist, and pragmatic. Julius Nyerere of Tanzania played this later role in the 1960s. In the 1990s, President Thabo Mbeki and Olusegun Obasanjo took the role of checkmating Gaddafi's continental scheme, pleading for new African institutions that dovetailed with the realities of Africa diversities and levels of economic development.

⁶ See for instance, Sarjoh Bah and Kwesi Aning, US Peace operation policy in Africa: from ACRI to AFRICOM, *International Peacekeeping*, 15, 1, February 2008; Richard Youngs, The EU and conflicts in West Africa, *European Foreign Affairs Review* 11, 2006; Youngs, A new approach in the Great Lakes? Europe's evolving conflict resolution roles, *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 22, 3, 2004; and Alex Rambotham et al, Enhancing African peace and security capacity: a useful role for the EU and G8? *International Affairs* 81, 2, 2005.

⁷ Paul D. Williams, From non-intervention to non-indifference: the origins and development of the African Union's security culture, *Journal of Modern African Studies* 106, 423, 2007.

Toward the AU and union government: the continuing governance crisis

The debates surrounding the construction of the African Union (AU) from Sirte, Libya in 1999, to Lome, Togo, in 2000, until the Constitutive Act in Durban, South Africa in July 2002, demonstrate the resurrection of the tensions between continentalism and sub-regionalism⁸. But unlike the 1960s, when there was an even distribution of power on the African continent, the early 2000s were a period in which Libya held considerable sway over the construction of the new continental rules. Equally vital, unlike Nkrumah who did not stay long in power to continue contesting the rules of the continental game, Gaddafi has more enduring power, particularly the resources to mobilise across Africa's diverse ideological strains. Thus while the continental vision that he articulated in Sirte never found broad resonance in Africa, it is a vision that he has annually tabled at AU summits, whether his colleagues tolerate it or not. Winning key allies in the continental crusade - such as Senegal's Abdoulaye Wade and Burkina Faso's Blaise Compaore - further helps to legitimise this agenda.

The AU Constitutive Act, like the OAU Charter, was essentially a compromise between continentalism and sub-regionalism

The AU Constitutive Act, like the OAU Charter, was essentially a compromise between continentalism and sub-regionalism. The only significant difference is the new emphasis on intervention by the AU Peace and Security Council in times of massive human rights violations and genocide. Watering down the structures of sovereignty is not entirely new: it builds on the renewed emphasis on intervention that the OAU articulated in the Cairo Mechanisms of 1993⁹. Unlike the OAU, the AU has incorporated many structures such as the AU Commission, the Economic, Social, and Cultural Council (ECOSCC), Pan-African Parliament (PAP), Panel of the Wise, and the African Court of Justice, among others. On the age-old question of economic integration, the AU does not differ from the vision of the Abuja Treaty, promising to use the RECS, which have expanded to eight, as vehicles for attaining the African Economic Community, with a new time frame of 2034. The three new recognised RECS are: IGAD, the Community of the Sahel-Saharan States (SEN-CAD) and the East African Community (EAC).

Six years after its formation, the AU faces normal teething problems in articulating its new roles and manning its institutions with qualified personnel against the backdrop of constraints on resources. Resources have become critical since in its new interventionist roles; the AU has to live up to expectations if it is

⁸ See in particular, Ben Kioko, The rights of intervention under the African Union's Constitutive Act: from non-interference to non-intervention, *IRRC*, vol. 85, no. 852, December 2003; T. Maluwa, Reimagining African unity: some preliminary reflections on the Constitutive Act of the African Union, 2000, *African Yearbook of International Law* 9, 2002; and Jackie Cilliers and K. Sturman, The right of intervention: enforcement challenges for the African Union, *African Security Review* 11, 3, 2002.

⁹ Konstantinos Magliveras and Gino Naldi, The African Union - a new dawn for Africa? *International Comparative Law Quarterly*, 51, April 2002.

to be taken seriously. The African Union Mission in Sudan (AMIS) was an earlier demonstration of the questions surrounding continental capacity to intervene in internal conflicts. Similar problems have dodged the AU's approach to stabilisation in Somalia under the auspices of the IGAD-led IGAD Mission in Somalia (IGASOM). In lesser profound conflicts, such as that in Comoros, the AU intervened to obtain quick victories by mobilising the military resources of a local actor, Tanzania. Efforts to construct the continental security architecture have continued apace with the African Standby Force (ASF) gaining momentum, and donors devoting considerable resources to building a future peacekeeping capacity for the AU¹⁰.

Old problems inform the new institutions, particularly the lack of movement on professionalising the AU

Old problems inform the new institutions, particularly the lack of movement on professionalising the AU. Dependent on member states for personnel, the AU has not improved much over the OAU, where cronyism, corruption, and other unethical practices pervade the continental civil service. A weak professional cadre is compounded by the fact that the AU is understaffed and unable to fulfil the new roles that African states have saddled it with. The AU Audit report devotes considerable attention to the internal problems that bedevil the organisation, precisely because most of the expectations and a bulk of the donor initiatives have gone into capacity building that does not seem to be bearing fruit¹¹. Models of professional international civil service drawn from the United Nations and other international organisations are relevant for the AU as it grapples with the tasks of making itself relevant to the wider African public.

The AU's formidable challenge has been the Gaddafi-led agenda for a Union Government. Dissatisfied with the AU structure, and smarting from being overshadowed by the Mbeki-Obasanjo approach to African unity, Gaddafi has forced debates on transcending the AU structures and moving towards creating a continental government. Hardly had the AU institutions been given time to mature and prove themselves, than discussions on the Union Government began to overshadow the operations of the AU. In conception and intent, the Union Government is an extravagant scheme that bears the full imprimatur of Gaddafi, but the more interesting dimension, as mentioned earlier, is how it has been popularised to the extent to which it can no longer be treated as a pipe-dream. Less mentioned is that this idea has coincided with Libya's aggressive economic investments throughout Africa, particularly in energy and infrastructure. Recent debates in Kenya about the extent of Libyan economic investment in strategic industries, and the funding of President Mwai Kibaki's re-election campaign, speak to some of the broad economic issues about Gaddafi's role in Africa.

¹⁰ Stephan Klingebiel, Regional security in Africa and the role of external support, *The European Journal of Development Research* 17, 3, 2005; and Nelson Alusala, African standby force, West Africa moves on," *African Security Review*, 13, 2, 2004.

¹¹ Report of the high level panel on the audit of the African Union, Addis Ababa, undated; The Africa Union audit report: a brief note, Africa Files, February 2008, <http://www.africafiles.org/article.asp?ID=17233>.

The idea of a Union Government was generated by the suggestion of the AU Assembly of Heads of State in Abuja in January 2005 to create certain ministerial portfolios for the AU. Subsequently, the AU Assembly set up a committee of seven heads of state under Gaddafi's staunch ally, President Yoweri Museveni of Uganda to examine the proposal. The committee hurriedly came up with a report that was submitted to the Assembly at the session held in Sirte, Libya in July 2005. The report predictably expressed the view that instead of creating ministerial portfolios in certain areas of the AU, Africa should work towards the formation of a United States of Africa. Not content with such a vague declaration, Libya and its allies continued to press for the formation of additional AU committees and studies to legitimate what became known as the Grand Debate on the Union Government, and force agreement on timelines. Despite these draconian manoeuvres, the conclusion of the AU Executive Council submitted to the heads of state meeting in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia in January 2007, was revealing:

(i) all Member States accept the United States of Africa as a common and desirable goal (but) differences exist over the modalities and time frame for achieving this goal and the appropriate pace of integration, and

(ii) there is a common agreement on the need for an audit review of the state of the Union in order to know the areas in which significant improvements have to be made to accelerate the integration process¹².

At the Accra summit in July 2007, which endorsed the need for an audit review of the AU, an acrimonious debate between Gaddafi allies and the rest of Africa pointed to the increasing polarisation of the Grand Debate. Prior to the Accra summit, Libya-sponsored meetings and academic exchanges throughout Africa had attempted to build a civil society constituency around the Union Government, winning significant minds that would influence public opinion. For instance, meeting in Tripoli on the eve of the Accra summit, a group of young African student leaders issued the Tripoli Declaration, in which they upheld the idea of continental federation and suggested that the Accra summit should hasten the creation of common AU ministers of defence, trade, foreign affairs and education, as a first step towards a union government. Furthermore, the group lambasted the gradualist approach to African regionalism, noting that it had failed to deal with problems in the past¹³.

In addition to the Audit report, the Accra summit reiterated the need to accelerate "the economic and political integration of the African continent, including the formation of a Union Government for Africa with the ultimate objective of creating the United States of Africa," but in a sign of deeper

¹² Grand debate on Union Government for Africa starts, *The Statesman* (Accra), 26 June, 2007.

¹³ *Ibid.*

differences, they continued to sideline Gaddafi's agenda by only conceding to accelerate the process set in motion by the Abuja Treaty of 1991¹⁴. More importantly, consistent with the emerging pattern of annual procrastination, the Accra summit established a ministerial committee that would examine the functions of the Union Government, identify its domains of competence, and define the relationship between it and the Regional Economic Communities (RECs).

The Audit report was not well received by African leaders when it was inaugurated at the summit at Sharm el-Sheikh, Egypt in July 2008, which points to the disquiet about the pace and process of reforms since the formation of the AU. With the bulk of the criticisms levelled at the dysfunctional nature of the AU Commission, the AU meeting accepted 19 recommendations of the Audit report, rejected 22, and referred 52 of them to the AU Commission for further study. To mollify the critics, the President of the AU Commission, Jean Ping, outlined major reforms he seeks to undertake to improve the AU, underscoring the importance of recommendations in the AU Audit report that gave priority to the values of competence, experience, efficiency and justice¹⁵.

Commissioner Ping, however, failed to acknowledge that the work of AU institutions has been paralysed over the last five years by the Grand Debate. Rather than being accorded time to evolve sturdy and professional institutions that would strengthen the spirit and letter of the Constitutive Act, most African energies have been expended on diversionary committees and reports that seek to lend meaning to an idea that few think is achievable. At Sharm el-Sheikh, the differing perspectives on the timeframe needed to implement the Union Government surfaced again. Libya and its West African allies, including Senegal, pressed for the immediate establishment of a Union Government and the appointment of ministers. Other countries, including South Africa, Ethiopia and most of eastern and southern Africa, however, adopted a more cautious approach to implementation, pleading for more consensus and clarity on the operations and mandate of such a government. As before, eastern and southern African countries advocated the strengthening of RECs as building blocks, while Libya and Senegal insisted on an immediate top-down approach, starting with the formation of a Union Government and election of its leader to replace the current AU Commissioner.

After failing, again, to reach a consensus at the summit in Egypt, African leaders deferred the discussion of a Union Government until January 2009 and directed the AU Commissioner, Ping, to draw up a report on the road map and mechanism

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¹⁴ African Union, Assembly of the African Union: Decisions and Declarations, 1-3 July 2007, Accra, Ghana.

¹⁵ African Union, Assembly of the African Union: Decisions and Declarations, 30 June-3 July 2008, Sharm el-Sheikh, Egypt.

for its establishment at the summit that will be held in Addis Ababa. Frustrated at this outcome, Senegal, a key advocate of the Union Government, threatened that the almost 15 AU member states that are ready for the Union Government should be allowed to go ahead with its establishment. Senegal's President Wade said that an "African federal government will be set up next January 2009 by those countries that are ready to do so." In the same threatening tone, Gaddafi pledged to "expose countries hampering the establishment of a Union Government, because they are the enemies of African unity"¹⁶.

Conclusion

The governance of regionalism in Africa is mired in crisis because of the unresolved questions of managing the relations between continental and sub-regional institutions. As long as the bulk of the continental agenda is framed largely in the context of subduing and submerging sub-regions, these tensions will not be resolved any time soon. Protective of sub-regional identities and comparative advantages, Africa's sub-regions will continue to contest the terms of engagement with the continent. More than ever before, these conflicts will occupy a large part of Africa's international relations in the near future, with uncertain outcomes. As the Senegal-Libya alliance reveals, these conflicts will be dominated by heavy-handedness, blackmail, and deception by regimes that are under siege at home and want to score points on the African horizon. Leadership on continental issues has always been an expensive enterprise, promoted either by an ideologically-inclined Ghana or a resource-rich Libya. Senegal is not a real player in this game, but is merely doing Libya's bidding as its aging leader refuses to hand over power to a democratically-elected leader within his party. Leadership on sub-regional questions has always been cautious and discrete, bearing fruit only when these institutions have attained a life of their own. Increasingly, leadership on economic integration is passing from political leaders to diverse actors in business and civil society, who are best able to define the parameters of integration that are enduring.

One way to resolve these conflicts is to return to the essential building blocks of regionalism in Africa

One way to resolve these conflicts is to return to the essential building blocks of regionalism in Africa. Where there are functional states, economic integration and markets have provided the modicum for flourishing cross-border and multilateral discourses on integration. As African states have stabilised over the years, particularly as Liberia, Sierra Leone, Burundi, and the DRC begin to find peace, the efforts to erect security institutions on the backs of the existing regional economic institutions seem misguided. It would be better to rethink the frame of regionalism back to the comparative advantages that economic integration

¹⁶ African Union summit reports: union government will take off in January 2009, Pan-African Newswire, 5 July 2008. See also Ladipo Adamolekun, What union Government? Vanguard (Lagos), July 16, 2008.

furnished African sub-regions, where markets and trade relations dominate the patterns of interactions. The consequences for the return to the foundational building blocks of regionalism would entail scaling down some of the grandiose security and political mandates that African regional organisations have saddled themselves with over the years. Transferring these roles to the AU in Addis Ababa would seem to make more sense as Africa reverts to the division of labour established in the 1960s between the OAU and sub-regional organisations. In the long-term, the membership of the AU is going to change radically, particularly if the eastern and central African countries can no longer countenance threats from the Libyan co-prosperity sphere. In such contexts, the AU may fragment along the more culturally and geographically delineated east-southern versus west-northern contours, an eventuality that, while defying the dreams of the current architects of the Union Government, may be the only way of resolving the historical tensions between continentalism and sub-regionalism.