

## The 13th Ordinary Session of the African Union and the Question of a United States of Africa

Richard Iroanya

This paper examines the decision to transform the African Union Commission into the African Union Authority as an important step towards continental political unification by 2015. Important developments leading towards continental political integration are highlighted and the rationale or reasons often advanced in favour of political unification are critically assessed. The conclusion drawn is that the desire for continental political unification may be good and ambitious, but conditions necessary for its actualisation in the near future are seriously lacking. The approach towards continental unification is therefore faulted as illogical. In place of continental political unification, a call for the strengthening of regional economic communities as a viable policy alternative is made.

### Introduction

From 1 to 3 July 2009, the city of Sirte, Libya played host to the 13<sup>th</sup> Ordinary Session of the African Union (AU) on the theme: 'Investing in Agriculture for Economic Growth and Food Security.' This theme, no doubt, was carefully chosen in recognition of the critical position that agriculture occupies in the collective search for poverty eradication on the continent. Besides calling for a common African position on agriculture and solid framework for food security

at the end of the summit, African leaders made decisions and declarations regarding other equally important questions confronting the continent. For example, they adopted a resolution asking the United Nations (UN) to impose sanctions on Eritrea for sponsoring rebel forces *al-Shabaab* fighting the Somali Transitional Federal Government. They condemned the arrest warrant issued against President Omar al-Bashir of the Sudan by the International Criminal Court (ICC) and strongly affirmed their non-corporation with the court in this regard. Other important

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Richard Iroanya is a regular political analyst and is currently based in Sweden.

decisions include the endorsement of the decision to transform the AU Commission into the AU Authority.

This paper is primarily concerned with the decision which seeks to transform the AU Commission into the AU Authority as an important step towards continental political unification. It analyses the rationale behind and approach towards political unification of the African continent by 2015.

## Background to the Policy of Political Integration in Africa

The quest for continental unification is not entirely new in Africa. Its history is traceable to the days of the struggle for decolonisation. It was one of the main issues surrounding the formation of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU). The likes of Kwame Nkrumah and Julius Nyerere championed the cause of continental integration in the 1960s. The two political leaders, however, differed radically on the best approach towards continental political integration. The present call for unification may therefore be seen as a continuation of the ideas of the likes of Nkrumah, albeit in a different historical context, under the auspices of a transformed body and the wisdom and courage of another champion – Muammar al-Gaddafi of Libya. Whereas in the 1960s sufficient political will to form a union government for the entire continent was lacking, presently some support seems to exist for political unification among African leaders. Steps already taken towards the realisation of this goal tend to support this assumption.

## Steps Towards the Realisation of the United States of Africa

Among steps taken towards continental political unification is the creation of the AU in 2002 when its predecessor, the OAU, was believed to have outlived its usefulness and needed to be replaced by a more vibrant continental institution designed to confront the challenges of the age of globalisation. The AU is therefore presumed positioned to succeed where its predecessor failed, especially with regard to continental integration. The creation of ambitious frameworks for sustainable political development such as the Pan African Parliament (African Parliament) in 2004 is one of the strategic steps towards continental political integration.

More specific steps already taken in the quest for political unification include the appointment of a committee of seven heads of state led by Ugandan leader, Yoweri Museveni, in January 2005 at the Abuja Summit to study the implications of the proposal with all its ramifications. In its July 2005 report in Sirte, Libya, the committee highlighted the need to work towards the creation of a union government in Africa. The committee's comprehensive report of 2006 graphically detailed a three-phased roadmap to the actualisation of an African Union government by 2015. Despite disagreements over modalities and the pace and timeframe for reaching the ultimate goal of political integration by 2015, member states of the AU accepted the goal of unification as a 'common and desirable goal' (African Union, 2009).

More concrete steps so far taken, include the decision to transform the AU Commission into the AU Authority with an expanded role reached at the 12<sup>th</sup> Summit of the AU in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia in January 2009 (African Union, 2009). The proposed AU Authority will be structured with a President, a Vice President and Secretaries 'with portfolios based on areas of shared competencies' (African Union, 2009). In the same light the decision to amend the Constitutive Act of the AU in line with Article 32 is another important step towards continental political integration. Consequently, the AU Commission is tasked with preparing, among other measures, the following (African Union, 2009):

- The legal instruments for amendments to the Constitutive Act, the Rules of Procedure of the Assembly, the Executive Council, the Peace and Security Council, the Permanent Representatives Committee (PRC), and the Statutes of the Commission related to the Creation of the African Union (AU) Authority ... convene a meeting of Government Experts to consider them.
- The structure of the new AU Authority, taking into account the mandate given to the Authority, in collaboration with the PRC.
- The financial implications of the transformation of the Commission into the AU Authority, in collaboration with the PRC.
- Report on the implementation of this decision and to submit the necessary legal instruments to the Assembly through the Executive Council at its Ordinary Session in June/July 2010 for consideration, adoption and subsequent ratification by Member States.
- Expenditures for the necessary actions from arrears of contributions.

## Rationale Behind the Policy of Continental Political Unification

The main rationale behind the quest for continental political unification is premised on Africa's history, often presented as unfortunate in several narratives. Africans are historically presented as having shared values in terms of common ancestry and belief systems that are based on humanness, solidarity and protection of the weak (African Union, 2006). Thus, as a collective, shared values and cultural practices would ensure the sustainability of political structures of a United States of Africa. Economically, unification is projected as holding the key to sustainable economic development of the continent. Thus, in the context of globalisation, political unification will serve as a bulwark against marginalisation and balkanisation of Africa's resources by external forces. Consequently, Africa's over-dependency on external assistance in agriculture, human development, science and technology, industry, trade and finance will be drastically reduced or eliminated (African Union, 2006). Given the context that the global political wave tends to be moving in the direction of stronger regional economic-political integration, the goal of political unification is good and desirable in Africa.

However, the rationale behind the quest for Africa's political unification is vague when judged against current political realities in many African countries. Reasons often advanced in support of political unification of the continent are the same on which the existence of multi-ethnic African countries rest. For example, common historical experience, similarity of culture and common interest in the search for sustainable development has not prevented underdevelopment and political instability in countries such as Kenya, Nigeria, Uganda and Sudan. The citation of common historical experience, similarity of culture and common interest as the basis for continental unification is weak and oversimplifies a complex issue such as continental political integration. It is faulty to the extent that it presents Africa's colonial experience as unitary thereby excluding differentials in degrees of impact of colonialism on the psyche of colonised people. Such differentials are largely held accountable for the failure and instability of relatively homogenous states in Africa, such as Somalia, Rwanda and Burundi. Colonialism, for example, created Anglophone, Francophone, Italian, Kenyan and Ethiopian Somalis each with a different agenda for the failed state of Somalia (Mazrui, 1986).

The citation of similar historical experience as justification for continental unification is limited and selective to the extent that it emphasises common colonial experience in complete disregard of differences in pre-colonial histories of African societies. Reliance on common colonial experience as a basis for continental unification therefore unintentionally justifies claims by some prejudiced Western scholars that African history begins and ends with European activities in Africa. To become a compelling evidence for unification, citation of common historical experiences must go beyond colonial history to include unique pre-colonial histories of different African societies. An exploration of pre-colonial histories will reveal differences in pre-colonial political organisations, mindsets and cultural values of African states. These differences are partly blamed for the irredentist and separatist impulses that characterise Africa's politics. They equally account in part for incomplete nation-building projects in different multi-ethnic African nations. It is doubtful if irredentist and separatist impulses will be eliminated in the envisioned United States of Africa. They will likely produce the same effects that have retarded growth and development in Africa since the dawn of independence.

The emphasis on African societies as diverse, yet characterised by solidarity, humanness and protection of the weak at family and communal levels has some elements of truth, but is it strong enough to serve as a basis for continental political unification? Firstly, it is important to point out that humanness, solidarity and protection of the weak are not unique only to African societies. Every culture contains these characteristics, even those often considered as too individualistic. Besides, these characteristics play little part in real political contestations. Evidence can be drawn from multi-ethnic African societies to support this assertion. Group interests override these values. They are relatively observed within a group as they relate among themselves and seek to realise collective interest at the expense of other groups. This has been the bane of most African societies as their populations contest for control of scarce political and economic resources.

Furthermore, the reference to shared values is exclusionary to a large extent. It tends to portray the African continent as monoracial because attention is consciously or unconsciously focused on black African histories and traditional and cultural values. Thus, the multiracial nature of the continent is hidden and the historical, cultural and traditional value systems of Africans of Arab, Asian and European descent expunged from the analysis of unification protagonists. The histories,

cultural and traditional values of minority races in Africa differ to a large extent from those of black African populations.

### Approach Towards Political Unification

The quest for continental political unification is supposedly 'based on a multilayered approach' (African Union, 2006). This approach emphasises reviewing and resolving 'internal contradictions at national level before identification and assigning of roles to states, sub-regional entities and the continental political framework'. Secondly, the approach is anchored on the 'principle of gradual incrementalism' (African Union, 2006). Thirdly, the approach relies on regional economic communities (RECs) as building blocks for political unification.

The emphasis on the resolution of 'internal contradictions' in individual African countries before embarking on the project of continental political unification is amorphous. It lacks precise definition. Granted, it is impossible to resolve all internal contradictions in African countries; precise definition of the resolution of 'internal contradictions' is needed to guide the debate on continental unification. But since the project of continental integration is already embarked upon, the assumption is that internal contradictions in African countries have already been resolved.

Yet, there is hardly any African state that can be 'empirically' regarded as a nation-state (Jackson and Rosberg, 1982). To a large extent, African states exist as 'mere geographical expressions' (Awolowo, 1947) characterised by strong allegiance to primordial identities. National questions are brutally suppressed and disguised as resolved or simply overlooked as irrelevant. Despotism on the continent prevent the evolution of adequate democratic political culture necessary for strong political institutions. The lack of democratic culture and the suppression of national questions will harm efforts at continental political unification.

It is not clear what the principle of gradual incrementalism implies in this multilayered approach. For example, it is not clear if by gradual incrementalism, continental political integration implies the beginning of a unification experiment with two or three countries and gradually increasing the membership at later stages. If this is what is implied, the approach does not seem viable in the near future. Whereas conceptually the AU's approach is gradualist, its practical application is not. It is rather fast-tracking

in nature. For example, the time frame (2015) set for the actualisation of union government for the continent is obviously short and unrealistic. Fast-tracking of processes have serious implications for political institutions such as the proposed union government for Africa. Besides, the African political landscape is dotted with examples of failed fast-tracked political unification projects. The Senegambia Confederation which only lasted from 1982 to 1989 is a typical example. In fast-tracking the processes of continental integration, critical issues to sustainable democracy have become sidelined. Therefore it is not completely surprising that Africans at grassroots level whose lives would be affected by political integration, are largely excluded from its processes. An expression of willingness in documents to create a 'Union of the African people and not merely a Union of states and governments' (African Union, 2006), has not been matched by concrete actions. The AU's multilayered approach is therefore top-down in character with attention largely focused on states and their leaders. Very little effort is made to articulate pan-Africanist ideas and consciousness among African groups and to seek for the legitimisation of the process through people-to-people dialogue in the form of referendum. If the union government emerges by 2015 without adequate involvement at grassroots level, it would be tantamount to imposition by African leaders and would face serious legitimacy crisis from the onset.

### Alternative Policy

The third layer of the AU's multilayered approach to continental political integration seems the clearest of all the layers. Although it is not original in conception, its transplantation on the continent can only be interpreted as an exchange of ideas which is natural to human progress and societal development. The approach has worked very well in the realisation of the European Union (EU). However, caution must be exercised over its wholesale importation and rough application in Africa. That the approach has, so far, worked very well for EU members, does not necessarily mean that it will work for the continent. Europe is historically and culturally different from Africa and its success may not be replicated on the continent. In this regard a modification of the model to adapt it to the African situation is needed. This is because the strengthening of RECs as a foundation for continental economic unification remains the most viable alternative to

continental political unification. Africa can protect and preserve its natural resources without necessarily forming a union government for the continent. African countries can explore similarities in culture and traditional value systems, historical experiences, current economic-political situations and expectations to forge stronger economic ties among themselves without necessarily forming a union government.

The quest for continental political unification amounts to illogical abandonment midway, of efforts at economic unification which informed the signing of the African Economic Community Treaty (the Abuja Treaty) in 1991. The main objective of the treaty is to build continental economic unification by strengthening existing RECs and creating new ones and not to achieve continental political unification by 2015. The Sirte and Lomé Declarations of 1999 and 2000 respectively, sought rapid implementation of the Abuja Treaty and economic development of the continent. Its sequel, the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), is also aimed at economic development and the evolution of democratic culture and good governance in Africa. These initiatives have to be pursued to a logical conclusion rather than abandoned halfway for unrealistic continental political unification.

In this regard the AU must seek for the effective implementation of economic treaties relating to the strengthening of RECs. In effect, this means overcoming obstacles that are largely blamed for the weakening of Africa's RECs. Among these obstacles are the unwillingness of states to surrender sovereignty of macroeconomic policy-

making to regional bodies and fears of unequal distribution of gains that come with integration agreements. Others include, but are not limited to, improving inter-African trades and overcoming fears of incurring consumption costs by importing from high cost member states. It is unfortunate that while the volume of trade between African states is comparatively low, economic ties with non-African states have grown steadily over the years (Alemayehu and Haile, 2007).

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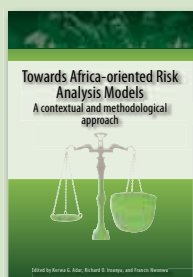
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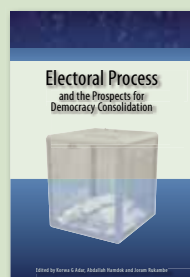
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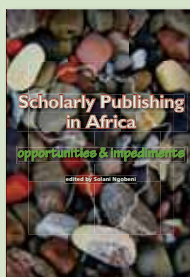
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Tel: +27 (0)12 304 9700  
Fax: +27 (0)12 323 8153

E-mail: [ai@ai.org.za](mailto:ai@ai.org.za),  
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ISSN 1998-7994



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