

GHANA CIVIL SOCIETY PUSHES FOR UNION GOVERNMENT TO EFFECTIVELY DEAL WITH AFRICA'S DEVELOPMENT CHALLENGES

Participants at an interactive session on the AU Grand Debate on the Continental Union Government have called for the adoption of the Union Government proposal to be tabled at the African Union's July Summit in Accra, Ghana. Under the theme "Informing Ghana's Position on the AU Grand Debate", the forum organized by the Institute for Democratic Governance (IDEG) and the Ghana AU Civil Society Coalition with support from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Regional Integration and NEPAD had three main objectives: (a) to find out Ghana's official position, if any, on the Grand Debate; (b) collect and collate civil society's views on the matter; and (c) to provide a platform for civil society-Government engagement on the issue, aiming to impact the formulation of Ghana's official position on the Debate. Held on Friday, June 1 2007 in Accra, the forum brought together over 60 participants representing heads of Civil Society Organisation (CSOs), private sector organizations, media, academia as well as distinguished public officials. Among the broad questions guiding the discussions were:

Are we for or against the establishment/adoption of the African Union Government at the July Summit in Accra?

Should and can the United States of Africa be established by 2015?

Can and will the creation of the Union Government accelerate and consolidate economic, political integration and development of Africa?

What should Ghana's role on the Grand Debate be, given Ghana's historic role on the Pan-Africanist front?

What is Ghana's position on the establishment of Union Government?

What is/should be the citizens' role and/or position on Grand Debate?

Reporting on deliberations at the Inter-Ministerial Consultative Meeting held in May 2007 at Durban South Africa, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Regional Integration and NEPAD, Hon. Nana Akufo-Addo noted the emergence of two views on the Grand Debate at the meeting: the "majority view" favouring a more gradual, loose union similar to the EU model; and the "minority view" favouring immediate continental government. In the statement presented on his behalf by Mr Henry Hanson-Hall, Director of the Africa and AU Bureau at Ghana's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the minister raised some difficult issues surrounding both views. On the majority view, the minister stressed that should that become the chosen approach, it will be imperative to work out some sort of a "roadmap" towards an eventual union government. Some of the issues raised on the minority view include the following: (a) how to ensure that any eventual Union Government is representative of the people; (b) how to deal with the problem of surrendering, whether in part or in whole, the sovereignty of member states to a continental government, (c) how to achieve a popular base for the proposed Union Government; and (d) how to define a workable timeline. Mr. Hanson-Hall further emphasised that the Government has not yet taken a position on the debate and encouraged participants to actively participate in the debate in a manner that facilitates the Government's decision on the subject.

In a highly spirited 2-hour discussion after a presentation on the AU's proposal on the Grand Debate by Dr. Emmanuel Akwetey, Executive Director of IDEG, participants were almost unanimous in their desire to see the Union Government established urgently. Statements such as "Union Government now; not in the future;" "We should have had the Union Government yesterday" etc. summarise that sentiment. Participants however expressed different rationalizations for their position. On why we must have a Union Government now!, Mr. K.B. Asante, a former diplomat and minister of state and the only participant to have attended the inaugural Summit of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) in Addis Ababa in 1963, argued that proponents of the gradual approach had used the issue of surrender of state sovereignty to

thwart efforts at meaningful continental integration. In his opinion, the most important task for a Union Government is the setting up of the required institution (e.g. a Governing Council to make decisions), and this, he argued does not require any debate about pace, dismissing the argument for gradualism. The Union Government structure has to be set up, and those willing to and seeing the merit of joining will happily make any concession necessary (even on the question of their sovereignty) to join, he reiterated.

That view was supported by Mr. Victor Gbeho, also a retired diplomat and former Minister of Foreign Affairs (Ghana), and by Ms. Cathy Addy of Center for Policy Analysis (CEPA). According to Mr. Gbeho, the continent has spent too much time on the gradualist approach, and any endorsement of more gradualism will not be in the interest of the African peoples. As he expressed, gradualism has been used as an “excuse by those who are not really interested in the concept of African Unity” to derail any meaningful continental integration. He expressed his desire for the adoption of the continental government proposal at the July Summit. Interestingly, however, he raised the possibility of a situation where there might be the need to delay the adoption of the Continental Government: that is to allow more time to galvanize civil society around the proposal. He however warned that waiting on the consolidation of the Regional Economic Communities (RECs) to serve as the engine for the Union Government, as some have suggested, will be counterproductive. On her part, Ms Cathy Addy remarked that in view of the differences that exist in the historical foundations and development levels of countries on the continent, it is neither feasible nor desirable to wait until all African countries are ready to form the Union Government. In her opinion, therefore, the continental government proposal should be adopted at the July Summit paving the way for, just like Mr. Asante argued, like-minded countries which are ready to pool together and form a Union Government, to do so and set clear standards in the areas of good governance, human rights etc. for admitting those countries which desire and are ready to join.

Many other participants justified their position on the basis of cost-benefits analysis of the Union relative to the development imperatives on the continent. According to Mr. Emmanuel Bombade, the Executive Director of the West Africa Network for Peace (WANEP), the leaders on the continent must evaluate the need for the Union Government vis-à-vis the development challenges of the continent rather than mere discussions of pace. According to him, the development needs on the continent are too huge that a gradualist approach simply does not make sense at this time. While acknowledging that there are daunting problems that face the smooth operation of any form of a continental government, he reiterated that a Union Government will be indispensable to the ability of the continent to free itself from the shackles of poverty, misery, and even corruption. In that direction, he called for a renewed resolve to form the Union Government now, a view shared by Mrs. Leticia Obeng, the President of the Ghana Academy of Arts and Sciences and Prof. Cletus Dordonoo of *ClayDord Consult* both of who reiterated the need for the Union Government now in order to effectively deal with the development/economic challenges on the continent. Mrs. Obeng further urged the leaders on the continent to “look ahead with faith and great resolve” and adopt a continental union government now; not postpone it.

While agreeing with the need to adopt the Union Government *now*, some participants expressed dismay at the lack of serious efforts by the continent’s governments to inform and/or excite the public on the Grand Debate. Mr. Ato Ampiah, a member of the Governing Council of the IDEG and former President of Ghana Employers Association, for example, recalled the pre-independence period in Ghana where civil society was very involved in the independence movement, popular slogans developed to excite the people, and the people knew precisely what it was they were fighting for. Contrasting that picture with the current situation on the Grand Debate, Mr. Ampiah castigated both the African Union and individual member states for making no budgetary allocations for, and making no visible effort to promoting this very important subject of a Union Government. Construing this failure as a display of the “usual” lack of commitment of the

continent's leaders to taking difficult decisions to improve the lot of their peoples, Mr. Ampiah passionately challenged governments on the continent to put the issue of the continental Union Government to a referendum so that the African peoples could themselves decide what they want, if they (leaders) cannot do so on their behalf. On this point, others pointed to the need to move the debate from one of *pace* to one of *what it means* to the peoples. The emphasis, they proposed, must be *on defining/explaining the relevance of the Union Government to the people: what are the implications of the Union Government for ethno-linguistic identity, food, health, employment, and other socio-economic needs of the African peoples?* This question, they reiterated, must be answered and communicated to the people appropriately in order to both inform and excite them about the whole idea of a Union Government.

Other participants expressed the need to differentiate between the *gradualist* and *immediacy* approaches by clearly defining the institutional underpinnings of each approach to help clarify the different positions on the issue. According to Mr. Abdulai Darimani of the Third World Network, as things stand now, either approach offers no clear understanding of the real or potential issues or difficulties embedded in them, clarification of which may be needed to inform opinion on which position to take on the debate. Similarly, Dr. Alex Glover Quartey, the immediate past Head of the Civil Service, while attacking the AU's over-dependency on external financial assistance to run its programs, called for a critical review of the administrative issues – manpower requirements (both the numbers and qualities) - of the proposed Union Government, and efforts made to close any gaps before the adoption of the Union Government. On a related point, Prof. Cletus Dordonoo tasked IDEG to research the countries opting for either approach – gradualist or immediacy - and explore the reasoning for their positions, a point earlier raised by Mr. Kwesi Jonah, Scholar-In-Residence at IDEG. This clarification, he argued, will facilitate the debate and provide a framework from within which both the public and governments could define their positions.

Other participants, mindful of Ghana's historical role in the Pan-African movement, also expressed the need for the Government to not simply *chair* the current Summit, but act as the locomotive behind the Union Government idea. Pointing to Ghana's historical role in the Pan-African movement as well as the present status of the country as the AU Chairman, Prof. Kwame Ninsin, Head of Research and Information at IDEG, who is also a strong advocate of the Union Government *now* tasked the Government to **lead** the debate on the continent, a call supported by Dr. Emmanuel Akwetey, convener of Ghana AU Civil Society Coalition.

Further, attempts by a section of the civil society to enact *Arab-non-Arab* divisions on the continent over the Grand Debate by making unhealthy insinuations about Col. Gaddafi's role in the AU were highlighted. Dismissing such divisive attempts, Dr. Akwetey pointed out that the AU/African Union Government is bigger than Gaddafi while adding that the AU has a problem of over-dependency on external help, whether on *Arab-Africans* or on the EU, USA or China which ought to be dealt with.

Expressing his appreciation of the spirited, insightful discussions on the topic, Mr. Henry Hanson-Hall, Director of the Africa and AU Bureau at the Ghana's Ministry of Foreign Affairs called for intensification of the debates particularly at the grass root level to generate a wider consensus in a manner that facilitates Government's position on the issue.

Closing the forum, Nana Prof. SKB Asante, the immediate past President of the Ghana Academy of Arts and Sciences and chairman of the interactive session, while calling for more debate on the issue also expressed the hope that the “deal is not already done”, urging the Minister to take the views expressed at the forum into consideration in articulating the country's position on the debate.