

# **Towards a People- Centered African Union: History, Prospects and Challenges**

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## **Introduction**

Half a decade after the creation of the African Union (AU), citizens of Africa are yet to realize a full integration into governance structures of the continent. When the newly mandated African Union (AU) replaced its predecessor, the Organisation of African Unity (OAU), many were hopeful of and subscribed to the new vision of the AU- a peoples-driven AU. The creation of new organs such as the Economic, Social and Cultural Council (ECOSOCC), the Pan African Parliament, the Peace and Security Council as well as the adoption of the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD and its African Peer Review Mechanism, APRM) heightened hopes for a continental body more responsive to the voices of its citizens. As we continue in debates about further integration on what has become the *Grand Debate on the Union Government*, it is imperative to take stock of how far we have come, what prospects and challenges there are to achieving the dream of a peoples-centered, peoples-driven African Union. This is the task of this brief.

## **Background to the OAU**

In May 1963, under the inspirational leadership of Ghana's Dr. Kwame Nkrumah, 33 nations, came together to form the Organization of African Unity, although not without disagreements about the *extent* and *nature* of cooperation necessary. The overwhelming imperative of unity, as explained by Dr. Nkrumah then was to help fast-track and consolidate Africa's political and economic emancipation so as to avoid the continent falling prey to recolonization or what he preferred to call *neo-colonialism*. As he soberly reminded his colleagues, "there is

no single independent African state today that can pursue an independent approach to economic development today" neither is there one "that can stand by itself without being forced to submit to colonialism once again." In five words, Dr. Nkrumah warned: "Africa must unite or perish!" Consequently, several initiatives, among which the *Treaty Establishing the African Economic Community* of 1991 stands out, were adopted towards deepening continental integration. The Abuja Treaty which proposes the setting up of a number of continental institutions, set out a series of economic and political steps that ought to be taken over a graduated period of 34 years towards the creation of an *African Economic Community*.

## **Challenges to the OAU**

Despite achieving decolonization and conflict resolution on the continent, the OAU fell far short of achieving its original, if idealistic, purpose envisioned by the likes of Dr. Kwame Nkrumah, Sekou Toure and Julius Nyerere: a continent able to and playing an assertive role in the international community; whose people will be free from misery and deprivation. Instead, the continental body became dominated by military rulers and dictators of all colors who had no connection much less any sort of responsibility to their peoples except to dominate and manipulate them. Ethno-lingual, racial, and ideological differences were aggressively exploited to perpetuate regimes across the continent. The state became personalized; citizens became *de facto* properties of each government and the peoples' participation in governance was permitted only to the extent that regimes were not threatened. Human right abuses became the "norm" regrettably supervised by the OAU which, in itself, was emasculated by its principles of state sovereignty and non-interference in the internal affairs of member states. The same principles became the shield for reckless abuse of the African peoples by their own governments, so much so that

the OAU earned the unenviable title of the *Dictators' Club*.

In the end, independent Africa's position in the international community became worse than it was when it was colonized, prompting many of Africa's peoples to question the relevance of political independence from colonialism, at all. The continent only invokes images of war, disease, poverty, and all forms of human deprivation. It remains shackled on all sides. In fact, Dr. Alpha Konaré, the outgoing AU Commission Chairman, could not have expressed the situation on the continent better: "We cannot even draft a budget in our countries without their (Western) approval." The OAU simply became a *club of the willing* providing the platform for members to say what they want to say, make the declarations they choose to make, sign conventions they so desired without an iota of political will to implement the declarations and conventions affirmed. Its citizens became victims.

### **The Need for an African Union**

Unimpressed with the rate of progress on continental integration, and inspired by the ideals of Dr. Nkrumah, the Libyan Leader, Col. Muammar al- Gaddafi, called an extraordinary session of the OAU at Sirte, Libya in 1999 to discuss the way forward for continental integration. At the end of that meeting, member states appeared convinced of two things: that the implementation period specified for the Abuja Treaty was too long; and that in order to cope with and effectively address the new social, political and economic realities in Africa, it was necessary to revitalize the continental organization in order to make it more relevant and responsive to the needs of the African peoples. It was also agreed that the OAU Charter and the Abuja Treaty would provide the basis of the new Union.

After adopting the African Union Constitutive Act in 2000 at the Lome Summit, and after working out the plans of implementation of the Union at the Lusaka Summit in 2001, the African Union was officially launched in July

2002 in Durban, South Africa amidst a great fanfare and heightened expectations. Expectedly, the African Union's a key objective was to help "accelerate the political and socio-economic integration of the continent." Also aware of its past, the focus of the Union on the African peoples is not questionable by any means. Among its broad-range of principles and objectives, the AU seeks to ensure the "participation of the African peoples in the activities of the Union", the promotion of gender equality, respect for human rights, rule of law and good governance; promotion of sustainable development in all areas to help "raise the living standards of the African peoples" as well as to facilitate the achievement of greater solidarity among the peoples of the African continent. Towards those aims, the NEPAD (which was also adopted at the Lusaka Summit in 2001) and its corollary the APRM, were to provide the development and governance blueprints respectively for the African Union. Other support institutions such as the Pan African Parliament (PAP), the African Court of Justice, the Peace and Security Council, the Economic Social and Cultural Council were all created to facilitate the achievement of a more citizen-focused Union.

### **The Union Government**

In 2005, following proposals to create ministerial portfolios in the Union, the AU set up an ad hoc committee of Heads of State and Government to study and make recommendations on creating "a stronger continental machinery" that could help the Union work on "agreed strategic areas of focus." After carefully examining Africa's economic and political situations (in consultation with members of the academia, technical experts, representatives of the Diaspora, Civil Society Organizations, executives of the Regional Economic Communities (RECs), and media practitioners from across the continent) the committee concluded that

“the necessity for eventual Union Government is not in doubt.”

Consequently a study to analyze the mechanics of a possible Union Government for the continent was launched in 2006. After reviewing the report of this study at its 8<sup>th</sup> Ordinary session in Addis Ababa in January 2007, the Assembly of Heads of State and Government decided to dedicate its next ordinary session in Accra, Ghana in July 2007 solely to the *Grand Debate on the Union Government*. Towards that goal, it further tasked the Union’s Executive Council to study and come up with appropriate recommendations on the Union Government for deliberations during the July Summit. The purpose of both exercises is to undertake in-depth discussions on the continent’s integration agenda “in order to determine where we are, where we are going and when and how to get there.” The Union Government, when adopted, is expected to be a transitory political arrangement towards an eventual *United States of Africa*. It will not in itself constitute the United States of Africa! However, its adoption would have become the single most important stage towards the creation of the United States of Africa. As a start, the Union Government is expected to focus heavily on strengthening its Regional Economic Communities, the development and restructuring of key AU institutions. Among the proposals expected to be tabled by the Executive Council during the July Summit in Accra are the granting of legislative powers to the Pan African Parliament, the merger of the African Court of Human and Peoples Rights with the African Court of Justice, among others.

### **Potential Challenges to an effective AU/Union Government**

After only five years of transiting from the OAU to the AU and, soon, to the proposed Union Government, it is impossible to ignore the relevance of problems encountered towards a meaningful continental integration under the aegis of the OAU to the effective functioning of the AU/Union Government. A

potential challenge will likely border on how to forge consensus on what form of Union Government we want and how to proceed: a confederacy, a union, a federal or “50%+1” government system? An early agreement on this will be important to help fortify the Union against inevitable future problems. Related to the above will be the issue of political commitment to the ideals of a workable continental union. Commitment must also be displayed by member states toward honoring their financial obligations to the Union’s institutions especially to the Pan-African Parliament, which will be indispensable to the cause of representing the peoples voice in the Union, as overdependence on external funding will be counterproductive to the very logic of the Union Government in itself. Again, the extent to which member states be willing to sacrifice some measure of their sovereignty for the common good of the continent will be determined by their level of commitment to the ideals of the Union. Further, we must attempt to explore what options there are to bring non-complying member states to the letter and spirit of the AU Constitutive Act. These questions need to be answered as promptly and as firmly as possible as we move toward the United States of Africa.

### **Civil Society and the AU/Union Government**

As we are caught up in the frenzy of the Grand Debate, we must be reminded that a key yardstick for measuring the success of the AU and for that matter the Union Government, if adopted, is the responsiveness of the AU to the voice of the African peoples on all issues across the continent. Reassuringly, the ad hoc committee of Heads of State and Government on the *Union Government project* emphasized that “*The Union Government must be one of the African People and not merely a Union of States and Governments.*” The Union’s position on the relevance of the African peoples to the Union must also be taken seriously. The

African peoples must matter to the development of policy directions of the Union just as much as governments do, if not more. But this is where the difficulty lies. As we continue, we must explore avenues for a worthy representation of civil society's voice in the structure and functioning of the proposed Union Government and eventually, the United States of Africa. Institutional strengthening and restructuring will be important in that direction. It is thus important that the civil society organizations take active interest and lead roles in the debates on such measures. The moment has come that we don't need to fight from "outside" any longer; we can and should "shape" things up. The earlier we wake up to this responsibility, the better!