

From the Organization of African Unity (OAU) to the African Union (AU): But Whose Unity? Whose Union?

By Tesfaye Habisso

“ Of all the sins Africa can commit, the sin of despair would be the most unforgivable -- unity will not make us rich, but it can make it difficult for--Africa and the African peoples to be disregarded and humiliated.... My generation led Africa to political freedom. The current generation of leadership and peoples of Africa must pick up the flickering torch of African freedom to refuel it with their enthusiasm and determination, and carry it forward.” [President M.J. Nyerere, former president of Tanzania, at the 40th anniversary of Ghana’s independence, Accra, 1997].

In 1963, when the founding fathers of the OAU gathered in Addis Abeba, Ethiopia, to establish this continental organization, they were “inspired by a common determination to promote understanding among African peoples and cooperation among African states in response to the aspirations of African peoples for brotherhood and solidarity, in a large unity transcending ethnic and national differences. ..” “The main objectives of the OAU were, inter alia, to rid the continent of the remaining vestiges of colonization and apartheid; to promote unity and solidarity among African states; to coordinate and intensify cooperation for development; to safeguard the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Member States and to promote international cooperation within the framework of the United Nations.” They were also fully convinced that in order to translate this determination into a dynamic force in the cause of human progress, conditions for peace and security, and for socio-economic and political integration must be established and maintained. They did not fail to understand that there was a critical link between peace and security, political stability and development. If there was no peace and security there could be no political stability, and consequently no sustainable development and prosperity. Without development and economic prosperity conditions would deteriorate and there would be no peace and security.

Developments in the African continent since then and even more so in the past years have not been so encouraging. Indeed, the peace and security situation of our continent has in a few years time gone from bad to worse. The earlier inter-state conflicts have now degenerated into intra-state conflicts. These conflicts have “cast a dark shadow over the prospects for a more united, a more prosperous and a more undaunted Africa which we seek to create.” During the four decades between the 1960s and the 1990s, there have been about 80 violent changes of governments [Adedeji 1999:3] in 48 sub-Saharan countries, excluding the recent ones in the Guinea-Bissau and Mauritania. During the same period, many of these countries also experienced different types of civil strife, conflicts and wars [ibid]. The 1998-2000 bloody war between Eritrea and Ethiopia that resulted in the death of over 70,000 combatants and innocent civilians, the endless violence and bloodshed in Darfur wreaked by the wars between the central government of Sudan and the rebel groups, and that has witnessed the demise of many hundreds of thousands of innocent subjects, etc. are also part of these mind-numbing tragedies in Africa. The latest issue of the Military Balance 1999-2000 of the International Institute of Strategic Studies (IISS) includes a map listing a total of 70 major wars in the 19945-1999 period which resulted in a total of 4,574,000 battle related deaths. According to the IISS count, most people died in South East Asia and the Far East (41.8%) and sub-Saharan Africa (31.1%), followed by North Africa and the Middle East (6.8%), America (2.8%) and Europe (2.1%). Of the 70 wars 33 were reported to be ongoing: 2 in the Americas, 3 in Europe, 4 in North Africa and the Middle East, 17 in sub-Saharan Africa, 3 in Central Asia and 4 in South-East Asia and the Far East [IISS Homepage].

During the decade of the 1980s alone, it is estimated that conflict and violence claimed over 3 million lives with 160 million Africans living in countries in the throes of civil war. The figure of three million deaths could be well over four million if we factor in the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, in neighbouring Burundi, and the protracted waste and destruction in Liberia. Since 1960, more than 19 fully-fledged civil wars have been fought in Africa; and eleven genocides and politicides occurred in Africa between 1960 and the late 1980s, compared with 24 elsewhere in the whole world. At the beginning of 1990, Africans accounted for 43 percent of the global population of refugees, most of them fleeing from political violence, their own governments, and many dying from famine, exposure and disease. The majority of these were women and children. Many of these refugees and economic migrants are harshly treated in many an African country—the same countries and states that have signed for African unity, for the unity/union, cooperation and solidarity of African peoples and states towards the evolution of the OAU to the African Union (AU), and eventually to the United States of Africa. The sad news of African refugees and economic migrants that we often hear of being mishandled and ill-treated in the hands of security officials and police personnel and languishing in horrible dungeons in Libya, Egypt, Tanzania, Malawi and in many other African countries while trying to cross over to Europe, the Middle East, South Africa, etc. indeed bleeds our hearts and numbs our minds. Whose unity, whose union are we aspiring to build and nurture if not the unity as well as the union of African peoples? Do we still entertain the false idea of the OAU period that if we establish a club of African heads of state, in the name of the AU, that it will become an association of African peoples, and that this would lead us to the creation of an African federation—an economic and political union in the end? This will never happen. It is an illusion, at best, and a pipe-dream, at the worst. Any unity/union that will lead us to socio-economic and political integration must be based on the unity/union of African peoples. Lasting peace and stability are also dependent on the development of people, and development in the ultimate analysis means human development and freedom. If the peoples of Africa are not free to choose the kind of political system that they want to live under and the form of economic and political integration that they desire, no top-down and elite-driven policies, strategies and programmes will be feasible. As Damrosch succinctly states : **“A state ‘freely’ chooses its political system only when its people are free to choose.”**[Damrosch, “Politics Across Borders: Non-Intervention and Non-Forcible Influence over Domestic Affairs,” American Journal of International Law, Jan. 1980].

Let us take the case of refugees and economic migrants, for example. According to reliable sources, there are presently about 1,800 Ethiopians (most of them from Kembata and Hadiya in the SNNP Regional State), Somalis, Eritreans and others detained in Tanzanian jails, more than 900 of them locked up in Malawian prisons, trekking all the way from their homelands to reach that so-called ‘promised land’ of Africa: South Africa. Is this what the poor peoples of Africa expect from their African brothers and their rulers? Is this what will achieve the brotherhood, solidarity and cooperation of African peoples that we most often trumpet at every AU sessions and meetings today? Many of the deceased Founding Fathers, one would imagine, will be crawling in their graves at the aforementioned catastrophe and malaise prevailing in Africa today. What a sad story indeed! On a positive note, however, the land of world-statesman Nelson Mandela is welcoming and accommodating these wretched souls in South Africa, providing them resident visas and employment opportunities, while, on a negative side, the lands of those equally great African statesmen and former as well as current presidents of Tanzania, Libya, Egypt, and Malawi are bent on detaining and persecuting passers-by, on their way to South Africa, Europe and the Middle East. What a sad story, indeed!

The OAU/ AU was to emulate the successes of the European Union (EU) and gradually progress towards an economic/monetary union and a political union (federation) in the end. Let us, at this juncture, have a glimpse of the EU success story in brief. Following the second world war, which destroyed the economy

of the countries of Europe, the European Union has evolved from attempts to prevent further wars, inspired by the French statesman Robert Schumann. The first of these was Benelux, a customs union of Belgium, Netherlands and Luxembourg; the second was the Iron and Steel Community which united France, West Germany, Belgium, Netherlands, Italy and Luxembourg in 1951. The six members then agreed to the Treaty of Rome in 1957 to set up an Economic Community to grow beyond a customs union towards a political union, which would amount to a federation. The US-designed Marshall Plan (1948) provided huge funds to help in rebuilding the economies of Europe, and boosted their strong cooperation by putting a condition that the beneficiaries should cooperate across frontiers. The EU subsequently adopted several policies, strategies and programmes at the speedy integration of member countries towards strong economic and political integration: European Court of Human Rights (1945), Common Agricultural Policy (1962), Common Fisheries Policy (1973), European Parliament (1979), Common Market (1993), Single/Common Currency (1999), European Constitution (2005), etc. Furthermore, the EU has established the Schengen Zone. What this zone means is that, within the EU there is a zone of passport free travel named by the treaty signed at Schengen in Luxembourg. This means that travellers from outside the EU will only be checked at the point of entry to the EU. In normal times there are immigration or customs officers only at the external borders of this zone. Within it border posts have been completely removed.

When we compare the achievements of the EU in the area of socio-economic and political integration and development over a period of 64 years with those of the OAU/AU over a 46 years' period, the differences are quite startling, both qualitatively and quantitatively. The heretofore achievements of the OAU/ AU, after 46 years of its inception, are only on paper: the Lagos Plan of Action (1980), the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (1981), the Abuja Treaty Establishing the African Economic Community (1991), the Constitutive Act of the African Union (2001), the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD)-2001, are some of these achievements worth mentioning. Nothing more has tested the credibility of the AU than its crazy decision to protect and defend a world-class tyrant and the butcher of the Darfurians, General Muhammad Omar Al-Bashir of the Sudan, against the ICC's arrest warrant. The AU is repeating the same follies of the OAU when the latter proved pitifully impotent in the face of the Rwandan genocide in 1994 and also warmly welcomed the butcher of the Ugandans, Idi Amin, to the chair of the OAU summit in Kampala in 1975 after Idi Amin had massacred more than 300,000 innocent subjects in Uganda between 1971-1975. What a travesty of justice! Most of all, what the AU has achieved so far is the creation of multiple complex institutions and structures and to employ a massive bureaucracy of high calibre experts and professionals who produce scientific studies and policy papers which are often shelved in the libraries and offices of the AU and seldom translated into productive activity that would promote the objectives of this continental organization and benefit the countries and peoples of Africa. Whatever the case, the reality on the ground is far, far from the rhetoric of the AU. No meaningful bilateral/multi-lateral cooperation at a continental, regional and sub-regional level is taking place; no substantial/ substantive socio-economic and political integration is happening in Africa today. Proxy wars, civil conflicts, boundary disputes and disputes on the utilization of trans-boundary rivers are threatening the already fragile peace, security and stability of African countries and peoples. Above all, African peoples do not still know each other, do not talk to each other, do not meet one another across borders, etc. First of all, African countries are not even linked up by adequate road, air, rail or telecom networks. The Overseas Development Assistance (ODA) that has been pouring in billions of dollars from the developed world since independence and the meagre resources that are collected domestically are often wasted on ill-advised and unproductive huge projects, on senseless wars, on conspicuous consumption and on enriching the autocratic regimes themselves, their families and their cronies, and not on the dire needs of building modern infrastructure and on providing other basic services or necessities to the poor masses of Africa. How can African peoples, then, be able to interact, to talk to one another, to trade with one another or forge solidarity and cooperation with one another? How many African officials and businessmen, and wealthy tourists return home from another African country via European cities is still an undeniable fact; the same goes for simple telephone calls. Even under these impeding conditions,

there is no massive and free movement of goods, services and peoples from one country to the other, no “freedom or right to vote with one’s feet”, so to speak, even among and between immediate neighbours because of border posts (Eritrea and Ethiopia are an illustrative example). Except perhaps for regional economic entities such as ECOWAS, COMESA, SADC, IGAD, etc. facilitating low-level inter-regional trade and economic integration, most African countries have created their own ghettos unto each other. From repeated lamentations of many individuals and from my own close knowledge, it is easier for any African to secure a visa and visit the USA or any European country than to get a visa to visit South Africa or Tanzania, for instance. We often tend to lodge complaints against American or European embassies for not easily issuing travel visas to us Africans but how about our own African countries denying visas for Africans? Pointing accusatory fingers at others cannot absolve us of our own ‘sins and shortcomings’. Further, some of our African states/regimes have even created their own small ‘*Guantanamo*’ and ‘*Abu-Ghraib*’ on their soil, to incarcerate/ detain not domestic or global terrorists but innocent African refugees and helpless/hopeless economic migrants, who happen to have trespassed their borders in search of greener pastures or in fear for their personal security and thus fleeing from their autocratic governments.

The main prerequisites and preconditions for the fulfilment of Africa’s many different potentials is indeed unity, peace and stability. As democracy supports peaceful relations between and within states and peoples, economic prosperity and the fuller development of people, unity, peace and stability make possible the development of stable political institutions, more productive economic activity and a more civilized and enlightened social life. Without establishing a stable climate of unity and peace, human rights cannot be safeguarded, democratic institutions cannot function effectively, prosperity cannot flourish, and human beings cannot discover their higher capacities for external achievement and inner fulfilment. Unity and peace based on social justice are imperatives for a thriving development and democracy, and in fact for our very survival.

Sadly, Africa is still cursed with leaders who make wonderful and passionate speeches at various AU conferences on the indispensability of peace, unity and stability for African peoples’ security, development and democracy. The same leaders unashamedly resort to undermining the peace, unity and security of African peoples, abrogating the rule of law, manipulating periodic elections, suppressing press freedom, and infringing upon individual and group rights. They trumpet about development but they develop themselves and their families and their supporters, and not their peoples and countries. These are leaders who, wittingly or unwittingly, undermine the very tenets and pillars of unity, peace and stability, democracy and development. All these maladies afflicting African countries and peoples across the continent have to end if we are to secure unity, peace, good/democratic governance and stability in Africa. Then and then only can we work toward the eradication of poverty and the realization of African unity, sustainable development and democracy in Africa. Any project, great or small, that disregards the participation of the masses will not be practicable. This must be our minimum criterion in pushing forward the lofty ideals of African socio-economic and political integration, leading us all toward the evolution of the United States of Africa in the end. Finally, the governments of the respective countries must proactively follow-up the case of the many hundreds of their citizens detained in the aforementioned African countries, as mentioned here above. They must protect their subjects from harms-way, as this is the duty and obligation of any government worthy of the name. Amen