African Unity at 50: From Non-Interference to Non-Indifference

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IAN TAYLOR, JUN 25 2013

The vision of African solidarity and unity was a long-held goal by intellectuals in the African diaspora and was based on the idea that Africa can only be free and a political power in the world if it is united. However, it was only really with the 5th Pan-African Conference in Manchester, in 1945 that the idea began to gain ground. Indeed, the Manchester meeting marked a turning point. Whereas previous congresses had been controlled by middle-class intellectuals from the diaspora, it henceforth became dominated by delegates from Africa and Africans working/studying in Britain. Attendees at the conference included: Hastings Banda, Obafemi Awolomo, Jomo Kenyatta and Kwame Nkrumah. Radical social, political and economic demands emerged alongside demands for an end to colonialism.

After the conference and centred on the figure of Kwame Nkrumah (who led Ghana to independence in 1957) the idea of a United States of Africa to defend African independence and advance the continent's position in global affairs was promoted. However, not all African leaders shared this view. In general, conservative leaders were much less keen on the idea of unity, preferring to retain their colonial ties. The French-speaking countries in particular (with the exception of Guinea) were hostile to any new set of relations that threatened their elite's cosy relationships with Paris. After a period of intense debate, instead of the United States of Africa, the OAU came into being on May 25, 1963.

The OAU Charter was essentially functional and reflected a compromise. Crucially, state sovereignty was enshrined as a sacrosanct principle of inter-African affairs. As a direct result, the OAU became an ineffective collection of states, mostly led by autocrats, who refused to take any action if it involved the domestic affairs of other members. The nadir of the OAU was probably when Idi Amin of Uganda was Chairman of the organisation in 1975-1976 at the height of his dictatorship, a dictatorship that ended up with up to 500,000 people dead. Typically, after Amin had provoked a war with Tanzania and Tanzania had reacted by invading Uganda, the OAU denounced Tanzania's response as a breach of national sovereignty. Consequently, Tanzania was saddled with the whole bill for ridding Africa of one of its more brutal and buffoonish autocrats, something which drove Tanzania further into poverty. In fact, Tanzania did not fully recover from the costs incurred by the war until Uganda reimbursed Tanzania in 2007.

Although the OAU played a role in the liberation struggles in southern Africa, its promise was never realised. Partly this must also be explained by external machinations. African independence took place at the height of the Cold War and independence was immediately constrained and rigidly placed within this context. Both Superpowers (and their allies) sought to manipulate Africa and actively supported one or other side with no consideration of the developmental consequences or effect this was to have on the African peoples. Indeed, true African unity was anathema to both the Superpowers and the ex-colonial masters, and all sort to emasculate the continent. Any criticisms of the OAU (and there is much to critique) has to be placed within this international environment.

Of its secretaries-general, the last, Salim Ahmed Salim, and the first, Diallo Telli, will be remembered as the most energetic and creative movers. Telli, for nurturing the nascent organisation at a very difficult period politically with the Cold War ever present; and Salim for creating the Conflict Prevention and Conflict Resolution Mechanism and for taking stern measures against member-states with serious payment arrears. Salim also did much of the groundwork in the transformation of the OAU into the Africa Union.

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In fact, by the late 20th century, it was clear that something had to be done. It was deemed that the "trade union of the African heads-of-state" had to be reformed. In the post-Cold War environment, Africa's problems were now perceived in a more limited regional context and responsibility was shifted to Africans themselves. Since 1989, Africa's international influence had been greatly reduced and its leaders decided that Africa had to be more united if it was to make its voice heard in the global economy. One related reason was that most regions of the world were forging bigger economic blocs and Africa did not want to be left behind. Equally, in theeuphoria that followed South Africa's democratic transition, a feeling of "renaissance" led to various new initiatives on the continent, most notably the replacement of the OAU with the African Union in 2002.

In relative terms, the AU is undoubtedly a step forward. African governments have moved away from the rigid stance that sovereignty trumps everything and now recognize the right of the AU to intervene in member states if war crimes, genocide or crimes against humanity are occurring. The AU has become involved in peacekeeping missions in Darfur and Somalia and it has also taken a hard stance against coup d'états. Today, countries where there are unconstitutional changes of government are suspended from membership. Currently, three countries are suspended: Madagascar, suspended after the 2009 political crisis; Guinea-Bissau, suspended after the 2012 coup d'état; and the Central African Republic, suspended after the conflict in 2012-2013.

Things *have* improved. However, clubs are only as strong as their members. A fundamental issue is that many of Africa's states are weak and dysfunctional and are headed by leaders who don't particularly care about their own people. At the same time, many African countries still conduct more trade with their former colonial masters than with each other. In the long run, a common African currency is envisaged as part of the AU's agenda. This immediately puts the AU in confrontation with France. Remarkably, even today most francophone countries continue to use the CFA franc, guaranteed by the French treasury. In these circumstances of blatant neo-colonialism, it is doubtful that the AU can do too much. Another problem is the wide divergence in living standards – South Africa's economic output per person is more than 10 times that of Nigeria. Such divergences and situations of uneven development characterise the continent in general. Again, a problem for true African unity. Until these challenges change, the AU is unlikely to reach its potential.

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