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A 'United States of Africa' by 2015?

The main item on the agenda for the African Union (AU) Summit in Accra in July 2007 is the creation of the United States of Africa. This returns to the center stage an idea which has been popular with many pan-Africanists since the inception of the (OAU) in 1963 - the formulation of a continental government for Africa. However, AU representatives will have to work hard at the Accra Summit and beyond to determine if, how, and when to make a United States of Africa a reality.

Background

- At the AU Summit in Abuja in January 2005, the Assembly appointed a committee to investigate the desirability and feasibility of ministerial portfolios, for the AU. When the committee, headed by Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni, reported its findings at the Sirte Summit in July 2005, its recommendations extended beyond ministerial portfolios to propose the formation of a Union Government for Africa. Upon review, the AU established a Committee of Heads of State led by President Olusegun Obasanjo of Nigeria, then Chairman of the AU Assembly, to investigate its feasibility.
- In November 2005, President Obasanjo hosted a broad-based conference with invitees from civil society, academia, the media, the Regional Economic Communities (such as ECOWAS) and technical experts, in Abuja to discuss the "Desirability of a Union Government in Africa." After the conference, President Obasanjo, in accordance with a mandate from the AU Assembly, prepared a "Study on an African Union Government: Towards the United States of Africa."

- In November 2006, the Executive Council of the AU concluded that all Member States recognize the United States of Africa as a common and desirable goal but have differing views about exactly how this Union Government should be structured and exactly when it can be feasibly realized. Subsequently, the July 2007 Summit in Accra was designated as the place to hold "the Grand Debate about a Union Government."

This paper considers the proposal that will be debated at the AU Summit in July. It poses critical questions about the nature and content of the "Grand Debate" itself and about the proposal for a United States of Africa.

Why create a United States of Africa?

Agreement between African Heads of States about the desire for a Union Government is an important first step. However, this does not translate automatically into a complete plan for its implementation. President Obasanjo's study, which will be the basis for the discussion in Accra in July, only outlines the broad institutional design of a Transitional Continental Government (proposed 2006-2009), a temporary Union government (2009-2012), and the United States of Africa government (proposed completion by 2015). Such a project will require a much more detailed blueprint for implementation within a comprehensive policy framework.

Since consensus around the goal of a continental government has already been achieved, it is important that the debates on the subject at the Summit and elsewhere are focused on the questions of how, when and why to make it happen and that delegates will spend less time on re-statements of the pan-Africanist vision for a united and

integrated Africa. Specifically, the debates must address the following questions:

- How would the United States of Africa differ from the African Union, and how would it deal with problems similar to those that are still unresolved in the AU?
- If the United States of Africa is a desirable goal, what are the specific objectives of its establishment?
- Beyond integration and unity, why is this continental government being established? Is it for the promotion of trade between African countries, for security purposes, for a coherent political voice in international debates, etc? These objectives must be explicitly stated to enable the Summit participants to have a substantive debate and evaluate the proposal along the lines of its objectives. If the plan is adopted, these objectives will be essential in monitoring its proceedings and evaluating whether the Union Government has achieved its mandate.

Problems with the existing African Union: How will they be addressed by the new Union Government?

In order to make the United States of Africa a meaningful institution, its architects will have to learn from the problems facing the African Union and build upon the existing structures with an eye towards resolving the constraints to its success. However, the proposal outlined in the AU Committee's, "Study on an African Union Government: Towards the United States of Africa," does not address how the fundamental problems with the African Union will be mitigated by this new institution. Although President Obasanjo wrote a report as Chairman of the AU Assembly which outlines many of the problems facing the AU, the institutional design of the United States of Africa, rather than resolving these problems seems to guarantee their exacerbation.

The following paragraphs which outline some of the challenges currently facing the AU are largely drawn from an AFRODAD, AfriMAP and Oxfam report entitled "Towards a People-Driven African Union: Current Obstacles and new Opportunities." Building upon their findings about the current issues around AU Summits we will consider how the current proposal for the Union Government may intensify these obstacles rather than address them. The report presents problems on the financial, economic, political, institutional, logistical and operational fronts which have plagued the AU since its inception in 2002 and Obasanjo's study and model for the United States of Africa does not address these fundamental problems.

Have adequate preparations been made ahead of the Accra "Grand Debate"?

Heads of States, as well as their representatives and staff are not adequately prepared for the biannual AU Summits every January and July. The relevant documents for the issues debated at the Summits are not circulated in a timely manner to allow delegates to conduct adequate research and formulate an informed position prior to Summit meetings. Some member governments do not have staff dedicated to focusing on AU-related work and are therefore unprepared to make substantive contributions at the Summits. In addition, the AU suffers from a lack of administrative capacity and as a result there are many logistical problems, specifically arranging accommodation for delegates in the host city and dissemination of the relevant documents. These hang ups prevent effective and substantive participation by members. The larger size and increased mandate of the Union Government and eventually the United States of Africa will only worsen these existing challenges.

How much civil society access and participation?

Civil society participation at AU Summits has been minimal and has been waning since 2002 according to many civil society organizations (CSOs) that have been consistently trying to gain access to Summit meetings and representatives. The United States of Africa is designed to be representative of the peoples of Africa, not only the member governments; however, participation in the AU has been limited thus far. Although certain women's advocacy groups have been actively consulted by the Courts, there is little genuine civil society participation except for a few select groups (about 50) who are favored by various governments and funded to attend the Summits. The institutions designed to increase participation in AU affairs, such as the African Citizens Directorate (CIDO), lack capacity. Moreover, the role of the Economic, Social and Cultural Council (ECOSOCC), designed to increase involvement of non-governmental bodies, is unclear and the provisions for membership are vague. CSOs experienced difficulties participating in earlier AU Summits in Libya and Sudan where some CSO representatives were actually denied visas to enter the country to participate in Summit related activities. Presumably a United States of Africa would not tolerate such exclusion, but there are no provisions in the proposal thus far that prohibit this kind of behavior and designate explicit and concrete avenues for civil society engagement.

What relationships between the proposed Union of African States and existing regional/sub-regional institutions?

The relationship between existing institutions such as the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), the Regional Economic Communities (ECOWAS, SADC, etc.), the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM) and the AU is unclear. The creation of a Union Government and the United States of Africa will create a far larger bureaucracy with many other committees, departments, commissions and institutions yet the relationships between the existing bodies has not been resolved. If these relationships are not worked out, the Union Government runs the risk of creating duplicitous structures rather than ensuring efficient collaboration between bodies. In addition to the relationship between existing institutions, the procedures and membership criteria of many existing bodies have not yet been resolved. The provisions for the Union Government do not promise to make such criteria and procedures more transparent.

How would the United States of Africa address the problem of funding?

Lack of funding for AU operations is a huge constraint to its efficient operation. Many of the problems cited above are a result of weak human resource capacity, limited staff and organizational resources and these limitations are often a result of limited funding. Many member governments have defaulted on their annual contributions and extraordinary summits called over the past few years to deal with specific issues have drained already limited financial resources. The sources of funding for the United States of Africa need to be resolved. Suggestions have been made about import levies and airplane ticket taxes on flights to and from the continent, but nothing has been solidified. The financing of such a large body is no small concern. Its effective operation is entirely dependent on said funds and many member governments are faced with extreme domestic demands on their limited budgets and have already failed to meet their commitments to the AU's operating costs.

How would implementation be monitored?

There is no effective mechanism to monitor and ensure implementation of decisions made at summits. If there is no punishment for failure to comply with decisions agreed upon at the summits the mandate and legitimacy of the African Union itself will be undermined. The civil society report goes so far as to say that some member states commit to various projects with the full knowledge that they will not be implemented. A guarantee that decisions will be implemented

is an essential and so far lacking component of the AU. The Union Government proposal does not have any additional provisions that guarantee that implementation will be monitored and enforced.

The five major concerns enumerated above are only a sample of the challenges facing the efficient and effective operation of the AU. The draft proposal for the United States of Africa has the potential to worsen many of these problems by increasing the size and scope of the institution without resolving existing issues. To have a productive debate about the proposal, AU delegates must think through what the mandate means, what they actually want it to say and how to make that happen.

What criteria for membership?

Beyond the articulation of objectives, Summit participants must consider what it means to be a signatory to this proposal and to the Union Government. Membership of the United States of Africa should not be de facto membership of all African states. *Membership should have meaning.* Therefore, participants at the Summit must consider which items of convergence should serve as criteria for membership to the United States of Africa. Are there shared values, a shared governance system, shared economic targets that unify these governments? In short, what is required of countries who want to enter the United States of Africa? Ascension to the United States of Africa should be based on specific conditions and performance indicators rather than on a verbal commitment by Heads of State about African integration.

What obligations for member states once admitted?

Once a state has met qualifications for membership, what are its commitments as a member state? What are countries signing onto when they agree to join this Union Government? What are their obligations? The July debate should consider the duties of constituents and whether they must abide by a certain code of conduct and meet some minimum criteria to retain membership of the continental government.

What are the required financial, policy and other contributions to the Union? In addition, the participants must think through the sanctions for misconduct. What are the mechanisms for the enforcement of the rules of the continental government? How will members be held accountable for the promises and commitments they have made? As stated above, membership to this Union Government should be a symbol of agreement on shared objectives, shared obligations and a shared commitment

to implementation. However, if a member state does not fulfill its promises, regresses in terms of certain indicators required for membership or does not fulfill its obligations, there should be consequences. If membership to the United States of Africa is not based on substance then it does not make sense to abandon the African Union as it presently exists. The new body will be just a larger bureaucracy without a mandate, and lacking in clout internationally and legitimacy in the eyes of the African people.

Recommendations towards a real “Grand Debate”

Although there may be a consensus about the idea of a continental government for Africa, a thoughtful and detailed debate involving all possible stakeholders about why, when and how a Union Government can be achieved is essential. This debate must take place before and during the Accra Summit, but should also continue into the coming months. Further analysis, thorough policy-making, political will, and grassroots support are all necessary for the United States of Africa to succeed in the long term, and in depth research and substantive debate and consultation before and after the Summit will be the first step towards realizing the proposal.

The nature and quality of the debate about the proposal for the United States of Africa will reveal a lot about the status of African integration, the level of engagement of African leaders and the citizenry and the prospects for the success of a Union Government. We therefore strongly recommend that before any permanent decisions are made:


- Information about the proposal should be disseminated to all member governments.
- Ministries of Foreign Affairs in each country should consult their populations and ask for their participation in the formulation of a position.
- Within each country, there should be a discussion about whether the citizens support the proposal and what amendments they would like to see in its structure. A coherent list of inputs on how the Union Government should be structured and the suggestion of a reasonable timeframe for its execution must be formulated
- The citizens of all African countries should be familiar with the idea of a United States of Africa and begin to think through what’s at stake for them and their governments as this process moves forward. Regardless of the outcome of the debate, as many voices as possible should be heard.

- The proposals should be disseminated for widespread scrutiny and feedback by both member governments and their constituents. The Heads of States should arrive to Accra in July informed and with the mandate of their people to vote on a Union Government and make suggestions towards the improvement of the proposal. ■ ■

This position paper was originally prepared by the Center for Democratic Development (CDD-Ghana) for presentation at the Citi FM/Statesman newspaper debate on the 2007 Accra African Union Summit.

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