

The african union and its potential politics essay



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On the 23rd of April 2007, an article was published in the New York Times entitled Africa's Crisis of Democracy, which discussed the troubled presidential elections in Nigeria. According to analysts and observers, Nigeria was moving down a worrying path. Politicians and voters alike were becoming more and more disillusioned and started to lose confidence in the Nigerian political system and in democracy as a whole. Peter Lewis, director of African Studies Program at the John Hopkins University, was one of the researchers that conducted a survey on African public opinion and he ascertained that the political scenes in different African countries differed strongly from one another, especially during elections and in their aftermath. He stated that " some countries have vibrant political scenes, while others go through the routine of elections but governance doesn't seem to improve" (New York Times 2007). Lewis used the information generated through the survey to confirm the claim that people's confidence in democracy has drastically decreased. The results of survey showed that there was a 13 percent decrease, from 58 percent to 45 percent, in trust in a democratic political system since 2001 (New York Times 2007).

Nigeria's 2007 presidential elections were plagued by chaos, violence and fraud. These phenomena are not only present in Nigerian politics, but form a reoccurring theme in African politics in general. Many African democracies, according to Western standards, can be characterized as failed. In an article written by Ali Mazrui, states are claimed to be failed when they are unable to meet the following six criteria: exercise sovereign control over their territory; supervise their resources; effectively and rationally extract revenue from people, goods and services; build and maintain an adequate national

infrastructure; provide for basic services like sanitation, education and healthcare; and lastly, states are bookmarked as failed if they are unable to bring up the capacity for governance and maintenance of law and order (Mazrui 1995: 28-29). Keeping these criteria in mind, it may be cautiously concluded that many African states are in trouble. The Angolan government can be drawn upon as a relevant example; the government lost sovereign control over many regions of the country and as a result of this, the government also lost control over many of its resources, infrastructure and revenue (Mazrui 1995: 29). Apart from Angola, many other African states are unable to effectively control many of their country's resources and set up an effective tax system. The consequences of these failings are that states become paralyzed by the lack of income and therefore cannot exercise their duty to provide basic services for their people, or even worse, a crisis of governance ensues.

In the search for an overarching solution to these national problems, many scholars and heads of state have looked in the direction of the African Union (AU) to offer some relief and support. But what kind of organization is the AU and how can it be expected to help in solving structural political, economic and social problems that African states have? In this paper, an attempt will be made to answer these questions.

Understanding Africa's History

It is important to understand the historical background of the African continent before even attempting to formulate a possible solution for the structural political and economic problems that the African states face today.

Before colonialism and the formation of African nation states, the different

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regions of the continent were ruled by tribes with different ethnic backgrounds and cultures. Due to these differences, the tribes were often in conflict with each other over, amongst others, their territorial boundaries. Therefore, it could be said that there were already significant political centers and territorial division based on the heritage of common identity. During the scramble for Africa, the African continent was divided along the straight edge of a ruler, completely disregarding the already existing political formations and territorial divisions. Logically, the political elites of pre-colonial Africa had different political practices which strongly differed from those of the West, specifically on their concept of sovereignty. First of all, in the different regions of pre-colonial Africa control was exercised over people rather than land and secondly, political practices tended to be shared amongst the different political elites. That being said, it was not uncommon for different communities to have allegiances to a number of political centers (Herbst 1996-1997: 127-128). The political landscape of pre-colonial Africa was a web of territorial boundaries, defined by ethnic differences, and political allegiances to more than one political center. With the coming of Western imperialism these already existing divisions were abruptly disturbed.

The initial transition from colonial status to independence in many African states proceeded quite swiftly and without major problems. This relatively peaceful transition can be attributed to the fact that in the last years of colonization, many of the leading African political figures were, for most parts, already in charge of their countries affairs (Emerson 1962: 277). After the abolition of colonialism, it was widely assumed that Africans would undo

the boundaries that were set by the imperialists, but this did not happen. Also, the political structures introduced by the colonial intruders stayed intact. There were a few important reasons for why the expected territorial and political change did not occur in African countries. The first was that the leading political figures needed the state structure left behind by the West, because if the structure of the 'Western' state was removed, there were no fitting alternatives that could compensate for it (Emerson 1962: 276). The only effective political structures present in Africa were the tribes, but these were of too small a scale to be of any significance (Emerson 1962: 276). Second, the inherited state system was in itself very fragile because of the absence of old-established political entities and robust communities which could lend stability the states (Emerson 1962: 279). Nevertheless, allowing the tribes to take over power as dominant elements, would have spiraled African countries into a state partial, if not total anarchy (Emerson 1962: 279).

After colonialism, African states were left with a fractured internal situation. Many different tribes had been lumped together in attempt to achieve an easy governable unit, but in doing so, colonialism left behind great internal divisions that needed to be overcome in order for the states to function effectively. Apart from internal unity, the political elites of many new African states tried to achieve African unity through the ideology of Pan-Africanism. The most simplest and satisfactory definition of the phenomenon Pan-Africanism is that " all Africans have a spiritual affinity with each other and that, having suffered together in the past, they must march together into a new and brighter future" (Emerson 1962: 280).

This idea of a united Africa and a shared African destiny sparked the initiative of the organization of Africa's political elites into an intergovernmental organization. They joined forces in what was first known as the Organization of African Unity (OAU). However, the establishment of the OAU did not come to pass without a struggle, for there were definite differences in the objectives of the political elites that participated. There was a distinct schism between the post-colonial African states who envisioned an African partnership; the states were divided into two groups, the Casablanca and the Monrovia group. These two groups had slightly different ideological backgrounds, with the Casablanca group being more radical and the Monrovia group taking in moderate position. The Casablanca group envisioned a new Political Kingdom in which the participating states gave up most of their sovereignty, whilst the Monrovia group held firmly to the concepts of state sovereignty and self-determination in a partnership with other African countries. After long and numerous deliberations, these groups were dissolved by the establishment of the OAU in 1963 in Addis Ababa (BBC News 2001). However, in 2002 the OAU was replaced by a new organization, the AU, because the OAU was judged to be no longer adequate for the region (Packer and Rukare 2002: 365). The Constitutive Act of the African Union entered into force on May 26, 2001.

The OAU as well as the AU were in part set up to help overcome the ethnic and social cleavages within the different African states, but before continuing with a further analysis of the AU and in which way it differs from the OAU and other intergovernmental organizations, it is important to broaden our understanding of these ethnic and social differences, and in which way they

undermine a strong and legitimate state structure. In the case of Africa, overcoming these cleavages has proven to be quite difficult. The colonial era has left a deep mark on the African continent; because the imperialists divided the continent without taking the already existing divisions into account, many of the post-colonial African states are plagued by civil wars and unrest. The lack of an overarching national identity and the weak nature of the state system do not help in resolving the problem. What is needed is the reactivation of communalism; a common denominator which many, if not all Africans can relate to.

According to Julius Nyerere, this may be found by introducing the ideas and beliefs of African socialism to all African communities. In a speech he made on the 13th of July 1966, Nyerere spoke of the difficulties that the formation of African unity faces. The development of the individual nation states will always be more important than the development of an African unity, because of the obligations that national governments have towards their people. This does not only pertain to political development, but also to the development of the national economy. So, when national governments take steps to develop themselves, it is inevitable that they will be taking a step away from African unity (Nyerere 1965 – 1967: 210). Nevertheless, Nyerere still believed that unity within and between states was possible; internal conflict and disunity can be overcome by the promotion of nationhood (Nyerere 1965 – 1967: 209) and an African unity can be achieved by deliberately moving to unity in every inter-state action (Nyerere 1965 – 1967: 210). In the Arusha Declaration of 1967, the precise ideology that formed the bases for African socialism were laid down. A few of the most

important elements of the Declaration were: the absence of exploitation, the major means of production and exchange were in the hands of the peasants and the workers, the existence of a democracy and the conviction that socialism was a belief and not just an ideology (Nyerere 1965 – 1967: 233-234). There are many more important statements in the Arusha Declaration, the one just as important as the other, but they all amount to the following: respect thy neighbor as you would want to be respected, because all men are equal irrespective of race, religion or status and all share the responsibility of building up a strong nation state, through hard work and intelligence, that is free from poverty and inequality.

Research Question

The main purpose of this paper is to first of all understand what type of organization the AU is and if it can be compared to any existing inter-governmental or ' supra-national' organizations. As the saying goes, with which one of these geese does the AU flock? After determining its nature, a further analysis of the Union's potential will be set out. The concrete research question is formulated as follows: What type of organization is the African Union and in which way can it contribute in solving any of the structural political, economic, and social problems Africa has?

Employing a predominantly qualitative methodology, which will take the form of a literary analysis, this paper will try to answer the research question by first answering a few sub categories or questions. First, the AU and its goals will be compared to that of its predecessor: the OAU. After that, a short comparison with the UN and the EU will be made in order to determine what kind of structure the AU has. Then, the potential of the AU will be discussed

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by focusing on its Charter and the areas in which it succeeds and those where it fails. By using academic papers, commission reports of the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty, the official website of different organizations, books and other sources, the objectives of this paper will hopefully be achieved.

Comparing structures

From the Organization of African Unity to the African Union

The OAU

On 25th of May, the OAU was established in Addis Ababa on the stool of Pan-Africanist ideals (Department of International Relations and Cooperation 2002). The basic ideas that underpinned the establishment of the organization was that African states needed to be strongly united against colonial oppression and racism, and also needed to improve the lives of the African peoples. Starting off with 32 member states, the OAU grew over the years to eventually gain a total of 53 member states. Unfortunately, by its fifteenth anniversary, the organization was seen to have failed in achieving its set goals: responding to serious intra-African conflicts and to act against foreign intervention (Packer and Rukare 2002: 365). Also, the OAU was plagued by an internal schism between radical (the Casablanca group) and moderate member states (the Monrovia group). Adding to this list of setbacks was the fact that many member states were troubled by a worsening economic situation. There was a drastic and immediate need for reform mainly because the contemporary challenges of the continent had changed.

By 1988, the goal of eradicating colonialism and bringing forth independence in Africa was almost completely achieved. Still, the economic crisis was a very significant problem which was not being dealt with adequately, mainly due to two important principles in the OAU charter. The first was the sovereign equality of all member states and the second was the non-interference in the international affairs of states (The OAU Charter 1963: 4).

According to experts, these two principles needed to be revised (Packer and Rukare 2002: 367). To say the least, the OAU was thwarted by the boundaries set by its own charter. The insistence of the OAU to maintain the territorial boundaries that were set by the colonizers prevented it from taking action in territorial claims, but also the insistence of upholding the two principles stated above restricted the OAU in intervening in many of its member states to stop economic degradation.

The organization was also structurally and functionally weak, particularly with regard to the secretariat and the secretary-general (Packer and Rukare 2002: 369). The insignificant authority of the secretary-general made it impossible for him to supervise peacekeeping operations and act as negotiator in resolving conflicts. Furthermore, it was extremely difficult to achieve consensus in the OAU Assembly, because the member states were often unable to transcend their national interests (Packer and Rukare 2002: 369). The final problem that the OAU faced was chronic underfunding.

In spite of all these problems and the proposal for the reform of the OAU, the African political elites chose to establish a new organization (the AU) instead of reforming the OAU's structure and revising its Charter. The important

question that comes to mind is whether the AU can overcome the weaknesses of that the OAU and its Charter faced.

The AU

In 2002, the AU was established and replaced the OAU. The principle goal of the AU was to “ protect the security of the continent, rather than the sovereignty of individual states” (Hanson 2009: 1). This is the first and foremost difference between the AU and the OAU, but the AU also plays an increasingly high-profile role in peacekeeping (Hanson 2009); another area where the OAU failed.

The main objectives of the AU are the increase of development; combat poverty and corruption; and ending as many of Africa’s problem as possible (Hanson 2009). As one of the only international organizations in the world, the AU recognizes the right to intervene in the affairs of its member states on humanitarian and human rights grounds (Hanson 2009). These guidelines were based on the recommendations of a report entitled: The Responsibility to Protect. The report stated that “ sovereign state have the responsibility to protect their own citizen from avoidable catastrophe – from mass murder and rape, from starvation- but when they are unwilling or unable to do so, that responsibility must be borne by the broader community of states” (ICISS 2001: VIII).

This key principle sets the AU apart from all other international organizations, including its predecessor the OAU.

The European Union and the United Nations

The European Union (EU) is an economic and political international organization founded under its current name in 1993. The objectives of the EU are the promotion of economic and social progress and the representation and assertion of the European identity on the international scene (NATO publications 2001). The EU hopes to achieve and maintain economic progress through the creation of a boarder-free Europe with an economic and monetary union, strongly represented by a single currency. On the issue of social progress, the EU promotes economic and social cohesion between its member states (NATO publications 2001). The EU asserts its identity on the international scene through a Common Foreign and Security policy as well as a common defense policy (NATO publications 2001). A commonality share with the AU is the basic principles of respect for national identities, democracy and fundamental human rights (NATO publications 2001).

The United Nations (UN), founded in 1945 after the Second World War, is an international organization that tries to maintain international peace and security; develop friendly relations between nations; and promote social progress and better living standards (UN: website). The UN also tries to safeguard the human rights of all the world citizens (UN: website). The UN has a unique international character that assists in the Union in reaching every corner of the world. Apart from peacekeeping and international security, the UN also works on a broad range of fundamental issues from sustainable development to the promotion of democracy (UN: website).

While both the EU and the UN are both inter-governmental organizations, the EU takes on the form of a more supra-national organization. Both of these

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organizations were also created through the decision of different states to cooperate in order to serve over-arching purposes in different issue areas. Nevertheless, the UN is able to tackle more problems than the EU, because it is not bound to one specific area of the globe. Also, the EU has the power to sanction its European member states to comply with the made agreements, by for instance threatening with economic sanctions. While the UN strives to achieve equality and respect for human rights, the EU is mainly concerned with regional economic integration.

The African Union tends to resemble the UN more than the EU. Even though the AU can only have member states within a certain geographical area like the EU, the AU still lacks the power to force its member states into compliance due to the lack of legitimacy. This legitimacy can only be attained if and when member states agree to give up a part of their sovereignty to the AU. Also, the issue areas with which that AU is concerned include other issues besides economic integration. In concurrence with the UN's objectives, the AU also takes on the responsibility of peacekeeping role and promotes social progress and unity within and between the different African states. Even though the AU was intended to be somewhat of a supra-national organization, it still has a long way to go before it is able to reach its fully functional and reaches its true potential.

The African Unions Potential and Shortcomings

As stated above, the main objective of the AU is to protect the security of the African continent and promote African unity. The AU has embarked on a number of peacekeeping missions under the inquisitive eyes of Western observers, who were not too convinced of the ability of the AU peacekeepers.

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Amongst the achievements of the AU are a number of successful interventions in a few of the member states (Hanson 2009). The 2008 intervention in Anjouan resulted in the successful expulsion of the Islands separatist leader (Hanson 2009), and the 2003 intervention in Burundi by the AU was acknowledged as a success by the international community. Still, the AU has more shortcomings than it has successes. The short life span and experience of the AU in peacekeeping lead to an unsuccessful intervention in Somalia and Sudan. This failure can be attributed to the lack of sufficient political and material support. Like the OAU, the AU faced a number of organizational and financial barriers as well as the same tremendous challenges with respect to poverty and civil war. The inability to effectively organize regional economic communities, on which the AU was also dependent for funds, was another one of the numerous shortcomings of this relatively young organization (Hanson 2009).

As things stand, the AU is still somewhat fragile but has all the makings of an effective organization. In order to achieve its full potential a number of obstacles need to be overcome: the first and most important being the financial boundaries that it faces. In order to overcome this boundary, that AU needs to invest in strengthening the economic community on which it is reliant for funds. Furthermore, it needs to find new ways of generating fund from the international community. The second obstacle that stands in the way of an effective AU is the successful cooperation between the political elites of the different member states. Only when consensus is reached between the political elites of the member states, can the AU act in uniformity.

Conclusion: Answering the Research Question

The research question that this paper intends to answer is: What type of organization is the African Union and in which way can it contribute in solving any of the structural political, economic, and social problems Africa has?

Before initiating the analysis on the similarities and differences between the AU and other international organizations, the relevance of ethnic and social differences within the different African states was discussed. This was an important starting point, because the problems that ensued from these ethnic and social cleavages were partially the reason for the establishment of the AU. The fragile state systems, left behind by the imperialists, were unable to fortify their legitimacy strengthen their institutional structure, partially due to the absence of internal unity. One solution to this problem was put forth by Julius Nyerere in the form of African socialism, which advocated national communalism which would unite Africans at the national levels and unit Africa as a whole.

After ascertaining the relevance of the social and ethnic cleavages, the AU, OAU, EU and the UN were compare with each other in order to uncover what kind of organization the AU was. The AU was discovered to share the most resemblance with the UN and therefore, like the UN, tends to be more of an inter-governmental organization than a supra-national one.

In answering the next part of the research question – in which way the AU can contribute in solving any of the structural, economic and social problems of Africa – the potential and shortcomings of the AU were discussed. The AU

has a very promising structure, but the organization still has a long way to go before it is fully functional. Therefore, it can be cautiously concluded that if the with the coming of years and through the overcoming of the many obstacles it faced, the AU will be able to make a relevant contribution to solving some of Africa's many problem.