

The African Union and the Battle for Africa's Soul in the 21st Century

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Introduction

Following the popular revolts that toppled Tunisia's Ben Ali, Egypt's Hosni Mubarak, and Libya's Muammar Gaddafi in 2011, many African affairs analysts have pondered on the reasons why these rebellions have not yet spread to Sub-Saharan Africa. William Gumede attributes this to the scarcity of people with internet access in the aforementioned region,¹ while Nana Attobrah Quaicoe claims that it "is because Sub Saharan Africa has not had the Islamic groups which have threatened the west."²

Both observers fail to stress that Sub-Saharan African populations rebelled against their autocratic leaders and demanded democracy, good governance, and human rights in the 1990s. As Ernest Harsch rightly points out, "in quite a few countries elections do offer alternative avenues for political change and expression of grievances. As a result, while citizens may still take inspiration from events in the north, they see less need for confrontational methods."³

The real question, therefore, is not why the Arab spring has not spread to Sub-Saharan Africa -for the Sub-Saharan African spring took place much earlier-, but why so many analysts believe that this region is as ripe for popular revolts as North Africa. In other words, why is the quasi-totality of African countries still gnawed by unaccountable political leaders, lack of justice, and democracy decades after African populations had started clamouring for better governance and democratic reforms? Why has the African Union (AU)

¹ William Gumede, "South of the Sahara Dictators Tremble," *Transnational Institute*, March 2011, accessed March 31, 2012, <http://www.tni.org/article/south-sahara-dictators-tremble>

² Nana Attobrah Quaicoe, "Is Sub Sahara Africa due for an 'Arab Spring'?" *Modern Ghana*, March 2, 2012, accessed March 31, 2012, <http://www.modernghana.com/newstthread1/381181/1/>

³ Ernest Harsch, "'Arab Spring' Stirs African Hopes and Anxieties," *Africa Renewal*, August 2011, accessed March 31, 2012, <http://www.un.org/en/africarenewal/vol25no2-3/arab-spring.html>. Harsch's article and Sokari Ekine's "No Spring in West Africa," *Pambazuka*, February 8, 2012, accessed April 6, 2012, <http://www.pambazuka.org/en/category/features/79776> contain overviews of comments on the Arab spring.

so far been unable to effectively “promote democratic principles and institutions, popular participation and good governance” as it set out to do?⁴

This paper argues that neither military nor financial weakness can adequately explain the AU’s inability to support the democratic aspirations of African citizens. This failure is mainly attributable to a primordial mistake of the type of Pan-Africanist ideology that permeates the AU: the misguided disregard and disrespect of Africa’s democratic past. The aforementioned error has led to an anachronistic betrayal of African people on the part of the AU, which is the tendency to overlook the mistreatment of African populations by autocrats on the basis of their African-ness and anti-imperialist stance.

Most of the coups, conflicts and social turbulences currently taking place in Africa are largely due to the grabbing of national wealth by unaccountable elites, disrespect of citizens’ basic human rights and civil liberties, and gross abuses of power by the ruling classes. The AU is in a position to help prevent many of these problems by encouraging African leaders to abide by its African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance, which came into force in February 2012. But in order to achieve this, the AU must acknowledge and embrace democracy as an intrinsic element of African culture. In so doing, the AU will overcome its past shortcomings, and act as a catalyst for the much-needed democratisation of the African continent in the 21st century.

I. The Shortcomings of the African Union

The AU boasts on its website:

One key feature that distinguishes the African Union from its predecessor, the Organization of the African Unity (OAU) is its vision of “an integrated, prosperous, equitable and well governed and peaceful United States of Africa, effectively managed by its own citizens and representing a creative and dynamic force in the international arena”.⁵

⁴ *Constitutive Act of the African Union*, signed at the Lomé Summit on July 11, 2000, 5.

⁵ African Union, “Partnerships,” accessed April 12, 2012, <http://www.au.int/en/partnerships>.

Yet, in view of the divisions within the AU, the conflicts affecting several of its members, the continuous sidelining of Africa in international affairs, the extreme poverty currently confronting the majority of African populations, and the lack of good governance in most African states, it is fair to assert that the AU is still very far from realising this vision.

The absence of unity amongst African nations was illustrated by their failure to elect the Chairperson of the AU Commission in January 2012, as there were several factions backing different candidates. Even on issues such as climate change, on which the AU had managed to persuade African countries to adopt a common policy, it did not succeed in making them speak with a single voice when negotiating with the international community, as Jean-Christophe Hoste narrates.⁶

Such lack of adherence to a common policy exacerbates the global sidelining of Africa. The prolonged marginalisation of this continent in the international stage is highlighted by the fact that no African country is yet a permanent member of the United Nations' Security Council. Furthermore, for most non-Africans, and even many Africans, far from evoking respect in the 21st century, the uttering of the name of Africa continues to bring to mind endless images of skeletal children, weeping women and haggard men risking starvation without outside help.

Underlying the enslavement, colonisation and exploitation of African people were their multifarious misrepresentations as a doomed group that only benevolent foreigners could save. These myths, and their modern manifestations, such as the 2005 Live 8 concerts, have been denounced by many individuals, including the author of this article, for "maintaining the pauperisation of Africans" by perpetuating "the dependency culture that aid plus neo-liberal economic reform will redeem the [African] continent from poverty".⁷ However, as long as African populations are facing beggary and famines triggered or exacerbated by wars, mismanagement of public funds, and droughts in states such as Somalia, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Mali, Mauritania, Niger or Chad, no amount of ink and denunciations will eradicate the perception of Africa as a hapless place where better off foreigners can and should intervene to bring some hope to the wretched natives.

⁶ See Jean-Christophe Hoste, "Where Was United Africa in the Climate Change Negotiations?" *Africa Policy Brief 2* (2010): 4.

⁷ Patricia Daley et al., "Open Letter on Live 8, G8 and African Development," *Pambazuka*, July 6, 2005, accessed April 14, 2012, <http://www.pambazuka.org/en/category/letters/28867>.

Like the OAU before it, the AU has been unable to either prevent the outbreak of wars in many countries including Côte d'Ivoire, Libya and Mali, or put an end, or find satisfactory solutions, to protracted conflicts in territories like Sudan, Somalia, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. The toppling of Laurent Gbagbo and Muammar Gaddafi largely due to the intervention of Western powers was condemned by a multitude of African thinkers as neo-colonisation.⁸ While this may be the case, the uncomfortable truth is that there would have been no opportunity for these foreign nations, however mighty, to meddle in African affairs, had the AU not proved incapable to stop hostilities as well the killing and terrorising of civilians in Côte d'Ivoire and Libya.

Even more glaring than the AU's failure to pacify Africa are its shortcomings in relation to its stated ambition to promote democratic principles and institutions in this continent. The selection of the long-standing autocrats Muammar Gaddafi and Teodoro Obiang Ngema Mbasogo as chairs of the AU in 2009 and 2011 respectively, clearly shows that democratic credentials are not a sine qua non condition for an African leader to command respect within the AU. Ethiopia currently has one of the most repressive regimes in the African continent, despite its official name being Federal *Democratic* Republic of Ethiopia.⁹ Yet it is where the headquarters of both the AU and the AU-controlled African Standby Forces are. It is naïve at best and perverse at worst to expect an organisation operating from such a place to act effectively either as a bulwark against the dictatorial mistreatment of African people, or as a standard-bearer for democracy in the African continent.

Arguably, the fact that Ethiopia's Meles Zenawi was, like most current African leaders, democratically elected, is a tangible sign of progress. For the overwhelming majority of countries members of the AU are no longer governed by unelected dictators relying on the military instead of ballot boxes to stay in power, as was the case with the Organisation of the African Unity. However, elections are far from being free and fair in many of these states. Furthermore, the AU has so far failed to either instil the mindset or establish the democratic environment necessary to ensure that African rulers do not misuse power and

⁸ See, for instance, Benedict Wachira, "We Are Watching You," *Pambazuka*, April 5, 2012, accessed April 6, 2012, <http://www.pambazuka.org/en/category/features/81293>; Nana Ansah, "Libya: A Wake-up Call for African Unity," *Pambazuka*, September 7, 2011, accessed April 6, 2012, <http://www.pambazuka.org/en/category/features/76093>; Amy Niang, "The War against Libya Is Criminal," *Pambazuka*, September 7, 2011, accessed April 6, 2012, <http://www.pambazuka.org/en/category/features/76092>.

⁹ The 2010 Democracy Index report classifies Ethiopia amongst the "authoritarian regimes"; see *Democracy Index 2010: Democracy in Retreat*, (London: The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2010), accessed April 15, 2012, http://graphics.eiu.com/PDF/Democracy_Index_2010_web.pdf; and the US Department of State's 2010 human rights report on Ethiopia records a wide range of abuses.

public funds, commit human rights abuses against their people, or subordinate their personal, selfish ambitions to the national interests. As Jean Ping, Chairperson of the AU Commission himself acknowledges:

Democracy is much more than electing leaders periodically through competitive elections. It is about acceptance of a culture that institutionalizes certain basic freedoms and liberties: freedom of association, assembly, expression of ideas, political organization; and property rights. Democracy is about affording the individual the possibility and hope of change, that is, change they can trust in.

In this regard, Constitution and constitutionalism in Africa need to be strengthened. Civilian control of the security apparatus of the state and peaceful constitutional transfer of power need to be promoted and encouraged.¹⁰

Unfortunately, Ping has not taken advantage of his tenure to enable the AU to inculcate African rulers with this culture of democratic accountability, justice, as well as respect of citizens' will and basic human rights. Under his watch, some leaders such as Côte d'Ivoire's Laurent Gbagbo, Zimbabwe's Robert Mugabe and Kenya's Mwai Kibabi have refused to admit electoral defeat, and caused mayhem and bloodshed in their countries by failing to step down. Others like Gnassingbé Eyadéma and Omar Bongo have succeeded in establishing dynastic rules in Togo and Gabon respectively, thus ensuring the accession of their sons to power upon their death. Many others including Sudan's Omar al-Bashir, Ethiopia's Meles Zenawi, Chad's Idriss Deby, the Democratic Republic of Congo's Joseph Kabila and Rwanda's Paul Kagame, have resorted to bribery, intimidation, violence and repression to secure flawed electoral victories.

The AU has certainly acted swiftly in terms of condemning coups d'état, even suspending the memberships of countries like Mauritania, Madagascar and Mali following the overthrow of governments by the military there in 2005, 2009 and 2012 respectively. However, this organisation has failed to address and curb an equally pernicious form of usurpation of power perpetrated by many African leaders whose democratic reforms are merely cosmetic, and who pay little more than lip service to the rule of law: the tendency to alter

¹⁰ Jean Ping, "The Challenges of Democracy in Africa", *The Citizen*, May 6, 2011, accessed April 7, 2012, <http://thecitizen.co.tz/business/13-local-business/10664-insightthe-challenges-of-democracy-in-africa.html>.

their countries' constitution in order to perpetuate their rule. This incapacity of the AU to oppose and stop what he calls "civilian coups" has been criticised at length by Dayo Olaide.¹¹

The AU cannot spread and protect democracy across the African continent unless it remains vigilant and prepared to act as boldly against these civilian coups leaders masquerading as democrats as it does against military power usurpers. In order to succeed in carrying out such an ambitious task, it needs to depart from the type of Pan-Africanism that disregards Africa's democratic past. It should become the standard-bearer for a vision aimed at inculcating African rulers and populations with the realisation that democracy is an intrinsic element of African culture which is as fundamental to African countries' survival and flourishing as unity. Doing so will enable the AU to act as a catalyst for the nurturing of leaders that will prove as effective against bad governance, underdevelopment, neo-colonisation and other challenges facing Africa as Nkwame Nkrumah and other Pan-Africanists were against the colonisation of Africa.

II. The Need to Rethink the AU's Pan-Africanism

2.1 Solving Conflicts in the African Continent

Just as the Organisation of the African Unity was created in 1963 by Pan-Africanists like Julius Nyerere, Gamal Abdel Nasser, Nkwame Nkrumah and Leopold Sedar Senghor, the impetus for the establishment of the AU in 2002 was the desire to accelerate the achievement of the objectives of Pan-Africanism, including the strengthening of Africa's unity as well as its political and economic independence. This reality is highlighted by Hakim Adi and Marika Sherwood, who write: "The dawn of the twenty-first century coincided with an upsurge in pan-African activities, the most obvious example being the creation of

¹¹ Dayo Olaide in "Senegal and Mali: Two Coups, Two Reactions", *Pambazuka*, April 5, 2012, accessed April 6, 2012, <http://www.pambazuka.org/en/category/features/81293>.

the new African Union by Africa's governments, largely as a response to the adverse consequences of globalisation."¹²

Though it shares Pan-African roots and objectives with its predecessor, the AU is operating in a different context. However, as pointed out in the previous section, like the OAU, the AU has so far failed to (a) avoid the marginalisation of Africa in international affairs largely due to divisions amongst African states, (b) rescue millions of Africans from extreme poverty, (c) prevent the outbreak of wars in many African nations and solve longstanding conflicts, and (d) promote good governance and democratic accountability throughout Africa.

This does not mean that the AU too should be disbanded and replaced by another body; for admittedly, it has been in existence for barely ten years. However, in order to preserve itself from the fate of its predecessor, which was widely viewed as a toothless bulldog, a talking shop and a dictators' club, this organisation needs to rethink its Pan-Africanist policies, to ensure that it does not repeat the mistakes of the OAU, and is able to effectively tackle the challenges facing the African continent in the 21st century.

The response of the AU to the crises in Côte d'Ivoire and Libya shows that it has not yet completed the rethinking of its policies necessary for this organisation to avoid incurring in the same mistakes as the OAU. In comparison with its predecessor's tolerance of African autocrats, the AU's suspension of Côte d'Ivoire's membership following Laurent Gbagbo's refusal to acknowledge Alassane Ouattara's election victory in 2010 was a clear sign of progress. However, the fact that Gbagbo was ousted from power by armed rebels loyal to Ouattara and French forces highlights the failure of the AU to prevent and solve conflicts in Africa. Instead of restricting itself to mere proclamations about the need for a peaceful and well governed Africa, the AU must urgently endow itself with the practical mechanisms required to avoid the occurrence of tensions and violence before and after the elections, as was the case in Côte d'Ivoire.¹³

¹² Hakim Adi and Marika Sherwood, *Pan-African History: Political Figures from Africa and the Diaspora since 1787* (London: Routledge, 2003), vii.

¹³ For discussions of the 2010 elections in Côte d'Ivoire and the ensuing crisis, see for instance, Giulia Piccolino, "David against Goliath in Côte d'Ivoire? Laurent Gbagbo's War against Global Governance," *African Affairs* 111.442 (2012): 1-23; Thomas Basset, "Winning Coalition, Sore Loser: Côte d'Ivoire's 2010 Presidential Elections," *African Affairs* 110.440 (2011): 469-79; Richard Banégas, "Post-Election Crisis in Côte d'Ivoire: the Gbonhi War," *African Affairs* 110.440 (2011): 457-68; Scott Straus, " 'It's Sheer Horror Here': Patterns of Violence during the First Four Months of Côte d'Ivoire's Post-Electoral Crisis," *African Affairs* 110.440 (2011): 481-9.

It was Nkwame Nkrumah's dissatisfaction with the United Nations' failure to save Patrice Lumumba and act decisively to solve the conflict in the Republic of Congo (now Democratic Republic of Congo) that led him to propose the creation of "an African 'joint High Command' that might intervene in future African crises" in 1961.¹⁴ The fact that more than fifty years later, women are still being routinely raped, and innocent civilians frequently massacred in the DRC under the watch of UN forces, highlights the need for the African Union to endow itself with the capacity to effectively quell conflicts in the African continent. The AU must rethink the prioritisation of Pan-African unity over practical effectiveness that was the hallmark of the OAU, and which has so far characterised the AU itself. Being able to successfully solve wars and other problems confronting Africa will strengthen African unity in the long term, not threaten or weaken it.

It could be argued that the AU's ability to intervene effectively in war-torn African states is hampered by lack of financial resources and military capability.¹⁵ However, AU members are signatories to the UN Charter, and have military and other partnership agreements with many powerful states. The AU is in a position to use these connections to bolster its fighting capacity should it choose to do so. Furthermore, the African Standby Force (ASF) provides the AU's Peace and Security Council with the practical mechanisms necessary to undertake military operations and peacekeeping missions all over Africa. The AU could lobby and mobilise the UN and key international players to strengthen the ASF's effectiveness.

As mentioned elsewhere, this writer spoke out against the invasion of Somalia by Ethiopia in 2006, arguing that ousting of the Islamic Courts Union (ICU) from power would trigger the emergence of a more radical group.¹⁶ However, regardless of one's opposition to Ethiopia's intervention, the swift success of Western-backed Ethiopian forces in defeating the ICU clearly proves that African countries can obtain the financial resources and military means they need to achieve their objectives when they want to. In an ideal world, the AU would rely only on itself to safeguard African countries' independence, a fundamental Pan-African principle. But the AU must deal with the world as it is, not as it would like it to be. Clinging on to the Pan-Africanist ideal of African sovereignty to avoid the establishment of

¹⁴ Adi and Sherwood, *Pan-African History*, 145.

¹⁵ Lionel, "African Solutions for African Problems?: Thoughts on the Mbeki Critique of Western Intervention in Libya," *Overstand.co.za*, September 8, 2011, accessed April 14, 2012, <http://www.overstand.co.za/2011/09/normal-0-false-false-false-en-us-ja-x.html>

¹⁶ Sylvie Aboa-Bradwell, "Think Africa: The Urgent Need for an African-Led Think Tank," *African Dream 2* (2011): 22-4.

partnerships that could enable the resolution of conflicts which are costing millions of African lives, and hindering Africa's development, is misguided at best and sadistic at worst. For the reality is that no African country currently at war has any sovereignty. They have all surrendered it either to ineffective UN troops that are watching impassively while Africans are killing each other –as is the case in the DRC, Sudan and, until very recently, Côte d'Ivoire-, or to countless powerful foreign non-governmental organisations that are exerting an influence on African leaders that local populations can only dream of.

There is, admittedly the danger that even with external support, the AU could be stuck for a long time in an unwinnable war. This is, for instance, the situation in Somalia, where the African Union Mission to Somalia (AMISOM) has been unable to defeat al-Shabaab, the radical group opposed to the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) for over five years now, in spite of military and financial backing from many powerful Western countries. But such a state of affairs is due less to the weakness of AMISOM forces than to its pernicious mandate. Because the overwhelming majority of Somali people were supporting the Islamic Courts Unions, the TFG, which AMISOM was tasked to prop up, is deeply unpopular. Therefore, though they may not be active supporters of al-Shabaab, many, if not most, Somalis tolerate it, and view its fight against the TFG as legitimate opposition to foreign interference.

The way forward requires a fundamental strategic change on the part of the African Union and other international actors. They should realise that the TFG is too unpopular, corrupt and unaccountable to Somali people to operate as a catalyst for the central authority and institutions that the AMISOM forces have been seeking to establish for years. Furthermore, it has failed to provide leadership in developing the federal structures necessary to bring peace and stability in such a complex and divided society as the Somali. The strategic shift that the AU and other international actors should undertake requires them to stop supporting the TFG, and not extend its mandate after August 2012.

What Should Replace the TFG? There should be a political process of engagement with clan, religious, business and other leaders. Such a process could be facilitated through local and national conferences, consultations with all groups and people, and should culminate in elections that will result in a more representative and popular government than the current one. The success of this enterprise depends on the acceptance and integration

of many al-Shabaab sympathisers, who would stop fighting should the international support for the unpopular TFG end.

The case of Somalia illustrates a huge conundrum facing the AU. While it needs to establish partnerships to secure the financial resources and technical capacity it requires to carry out effective military operations in conflict-ridden African countries, this organisation must remain vigilant. It has to ensure that it undertakes only missions that are in the interest of local populations, and not driven by the self-serving, narrow-minded agenda of either an African nation (Ethiopia in the case of Somalia), or mighty foreign states. Furthermore, the intervention of France, the UK and other Western countries while the AU was still attempting to find a peaceful resolution to the conflict in Libya highlights the urgent need for this organisation to devise a better strategy to keep foreign meddling at bay, and preserve the independence of African nations.

2.2 Preserving African Countries' Independence

As pointed out earlier, despite being independent on paper, war-stricken African states are not so in reality, as they depend either on foreign troops or international non-governmental organisations operating there –a situation that also applies to some countries that are peaceful but too poor and badly governed to satisfy the basic needs of their citizens. Furthermore, drawing on centuries of Westerners' tendency to plunder and destroy Africa while feigning to help fix its problems, some Western intellectuals, like the historian Niall Ferguson, are openly advocating the re-colonisation of this continent under the pretence of pursuing the acceleration of its economic development.¹⁷ In addition, many Western leaders are using more subtle reasons –moral obligation to prevent brutal African rulers from massacring their people, stopping civil wars, supporting the democratic aspirations of African populations and so on- in order to realise their imperialistic ambitions in Africa.

This situation has been widely denounced by African politicians like Thabo Mbeki, Robert Mugabe, Teodoro Obiang, and observers such as Amy Niang, Nana Ansah, and many

¹⁷ For a thorough critique of Niall Ferguson's advocacy of Western re-colonisation of Africa, see Susan Akono, "An Unfinished Business," *EnterText* 4.2 (2004-5): 37-51, accessed April 23, 2012, http://arts.brunel.ac.uk/gate/entertext/4_2/akono.pdf.

others.¹⁸ The condemnation of Western and other powerful nations' abuse of humanitarian reasons to install puppets through whom they can control and exploit weak, but resource-rich African states, is laudable and necessary. Nevertheless, as this writer has argued elsewhere,¹⁹ instead of merely condemning the actions of self-interested outsiders, concerned Africans should enquire why so many African countries are still exposed to foreign imperialism. More concretely, in the case of the AU, given that its *raison d'être* is the Pan-African goal to ensure the independence of all African territories, this organisation must urgently engage in a thorough soul-searching process aimed at ascertaining why it has so utterly failed to secure Africa's sovereignty, and find practical ways of overcoming this failure.

The AU has so far been unable to preserve Africa's independence because it has not yet managed to make African leaders acquire the best shields available to modern rulers of weak nations: the support of the overwhelming majority of their people on the one hand and, on the other hand, the respect of human rights, rule of law, justice, and democratically chosen constitutions. Nelson Mandela had the aforementioned shields when he was president and that is why, despite all the wealth, mineral and other resources of South Africa, no foreign power would have attacked him. Ian Khama and John Atta Mills, the presidents of Botswana and Ghana, have them, too. Thus, although their countries are rich in diamonds, oil and many other natural resources, no present-day Western nation would plan to invade and re-colonise them.

Like the OAU before it, the AU has proved incapable to challenge and ostracise African dictators such as Robert Mugabe and Teodoro Obiang who have been denying basic freedoms to their people for decades. Furthermore, the AU has allowed Muammar Gaddafi, one of the most oppressive rulers in Africa, to become the standard-bearer for African unity,

¹⁸ See Thabo Mbeki, "Dullah Omar Eighth Memorial Lecture," Thabo Mbeki Foundation, February 16, 2012, accessed April 7, 2012, <http://www.thabombekifoundation.org.za/Pages/Dullah-Omar-Eighth-Memorial-Lecture-By-The-Tmf-Patron.aspx>; Colum Lynch, "Mugabe Attacks NATO over Libya Intervention," *Foreign Policy*, September 23, 2011, accessed April 7, 2012, http://turtlebay.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/09/23/mugabe_attacks_nato_over_libya_intervention; Amy Niang, "The War against Libya Is Criminal," *Pambazuka*, September 7, 2011, accessed April 6, 2012, <http://www.pambazuka.org/en/category/features/76092>, and Nana Ansah, "Libya: A Wake-up Call for African Unity," *Pambazuka*, September 7, 2011, accessed April 6, 2012, <http://www.pambazuka.org/en/category/features/76093>.

¹⁹ Sylvie Aboa-Bradwell, "Libya and the Battle for Africa's Soul," African Peoples Advocacy, May 3, 2011, accessed April 23, 2012, <http://www.apadvocacy.org/2011/05/libya-and-the-battle-for-africas-soul/>. The rest of this section is a scholarly elaboration of the ideas expressed in that blog article. It is this author's hope that the forthcoming Madrid conference and publication of the present paper will provide a wider, more powerful platform for the dissemination and discussion of these ideas.

and its chairman in 2009. The negative impact of Gaddafi's tenure on Africa's unity and African people's human rights has been highlighted by Horace Campbell.²⁰

Arguably, Gaddafi was admired by many Africans within the AU and elsewhere as a courageous, long-standing African freedom fighter and anti-imperialist. However, the AU must realise that overlooking the mistreatment of African populations by autocrats on the basis of their africaness and anti-imperialist stance in the twenty-first century is an anachronistic betrayal of African people. For exhibiting the courage to confront white and other foreign people in the 19th and 20th centuries -when they treated and regarded Africans as inferior and even animals- was enough for African nationalists and pan-Africanists to earn the respect and loyalty of fellow Africans then, but not anymore.

The fact that Libyan civilians including students, engineers, doctors or builders with no military experience were prepared to sacrifice their lives by confronting Gaddafi's brutal army and mercenaries clearly shows that africaness and anti-imperialist attitude should no longer be enough for an African ruler to cling to power. These people wanted freedom, justice, respect of their human rights, and dignity: everything that for a long time, the AU, countless African nationalists and pan-Africanists, and the many admirers of Gaddafi have failed to require from African leaders as a sine qua non condition for them to be viewed and treated with deference.

Demanding justice, equality and dignity from foreigners and not from African leaders was an understandable mistake when Africans were oppressed, dominated and humiliated by foreign colonisers. But it is an unforgivable abrogation of the AU's responsibility and duty of care towards African people in post-colonial or even neo-colonial Africa. It is certainly true, as Mahmood Mamdani asserts in relation to the former Libyan leader that:

Both in the longevity of his rule and in his style of governance, Gaddafi may have been extreme. But he was not exceptional. The longer they stay in power, the more African presidents seek to personalise power. Their success erodes the institutional

²⁰ Horace Campbell, "Gaddafi Was an Obstacle to African Unity," *Think Africa*, October 21, 2011, accessed April 23, 2012, <http://thinkafricapress.com/libya/gadaffi-was-obstacle-african-unity>.

basis of the state. [...] The African strongmen are going the way of Nkrumah, and in extreme cases Gaddafi, not Nyerere.²¹

However, it is imperative for the AU to realise that dictatorships inspired by the tyrannical style of the Pan-Africanist and anti-imperialist Nkrumah can no longer be tolerated in 21st century Africa. For using a leader's africanness, Pan-Africanism or anti-imperialism as a pretext to overlook, justify and support any type of human rights violations, mass killings, injustice, corruption, megalomania and abuses has proved, and will always prove, disastrous for African rulers and African people. This is and will remain so for many reasons, including the following:

1. It means that any opportunist, any mass murderer, any kleptocrat can legitimise and justify all type of crimes against African populations, as long that they wrap these crimes into the cloak of African nationalism and Pan-Africanism.
2. It also means that the best shields available to modern rulers of weak nations mentioned earlier will always be out of the reach of most African leaders.
3. African tyrants ruling with total disregard for justice and rule of law will always be more preoccupied by the need to defeat the opponents of their dictatorial regime than by the development and interest of their countries.
4. The desire for justice, freedom and dignity inherent in all human beings will always ensure that there are many African people who hate and despise these cruel, tyrannical African leaders. Just as a person who is drowning would cling to anything, including a snake, the oppressed victims of such rulers would not hesitate to welcome anything, including foreign intervention, to get rid of their tormentors. What right, what moral authority would a dictator-friendly AU, or any African nationalist or Pan-Africanist who admires and defends African tyrants have to chastise these people?

It is, however, crucial to stress that the need to keep foreign intervention at bay should not be the only reason for African leaders to adopt democracy, respect human rights, pacify their countries, and undertake other necessary reforms. This could still prove very effective in the present and the near future to prevent meddling from mighty Western states, which

²¹ Mahmood Mamdani, "What Does Gaddafi's Fall Mean for Africa?" *Pambazuka*, September 6, 2011, accessed April 6, 2012, <http://www.pambazuka.org/en/category/features/76055>.

are democratic, and whose populations would not tolerate the overthrow of democratically elected, accountable, and just African leaders. However, there are emerging powers like China and, to some extent, Russia, that are not democratic, and may use other excuses in the long term to subjugate African nations.

The AU and concerned Africans should champion the democratisation of the African continent because democracy is an intrinsic part of African culture. Negating its democratic past and traditions, and misrepresenting pre-colonial Africa as a haven for autocrats and lifelong brutal rulers was an understandable mistake committed by many freedom fighters and Pan-Africanists when they were colonised by Western democracies, and eager to define themselves in opposition to Westerners. But a thorough reassessment of the Pan-African ideology that permeates the AU is imperative. Such an exercise would enable the AU and, by extension, most Africans, to realise that perpetuating this misrepresentation in either post-colonial or, admittedly, neo-colonial Africa, would be an unpardonable abandonment of Africans' roots and a soul-destroying endeavour.

This reappraisal would also facilitate the evolution of Pan-Africanism that is required for this ideology to remain relevant and effective in the 21st century. In addition, it would enable the AU to (a) provide Africa with a vision whose realisation could lead to the dawn of truly independent and prosperous African countries united by their adherence to, and belief in, a common set of democratic values, and (b) endow this continent with an unshakable, everlasting sense of identity, purpose and direction.

III. Providing a Vision for Africa in the 21st Century

3.1 Democracy as an Intrinsic African Form of Government

The recent receding of democracy around the world has been widely commented.²² As pointed out earlier, there are more states adhering to this form of government in Africa than

²² See, for instance, *Democracy Index 2010: Democracy in Retreat*, (London: The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2010), accessed April 15, 2012, http://graphics.eiu.com/PDF/Democracy_Index_2010_web.pdf; "Current Challenges to Democracy: A Statement of the Steering Committee of the World Movement for Democracy," World Movement for Democracy, January 2008, accessed April 27, 2012, <http://www.wmd.org/about/current-challenges/current-challenges-democracy>; and Gary Bland and Cynthia J. Arnson (eds.), *Democratic Deficits:*

at the time of the OAU. However, the AU should remain very vigilant and proactive in terms of preventing the regression of democratic and constitutional reforms where they have already been achieved, and promoting them where they are incomplete or inexistent. Furthermore, because of the current economic success of dictatorial China, many foreign and African voices, some very influential, are increasingly presenting this country as an economic and even political role model for African nations.²³

But the AU must steadfastly resist the siren calls of those who are advocating a return to dictatorial rule in Africa; for decades of tyrannical regimes have already failed to bring development, peace and genuine political and economic independence to most states in this continent. In contrast, African countries such as Botswana and Mauritius that have embraced democracy for decades have fared much better than their dictatorial counterparts in terms of economic prosperity, peace and development opportunities for young and other people. Furthermore, the AU should become the standard-bearer of the democratisation of Africa on the basis that democracy is an intrinsic African form of government, as this writer has argued at length elsewhere.²⁴

The denigration, denial, misrepresentation or overlooking of the colonised people's culture and achievements is neither new nor unfathomable. Most people can easily perceive that this is done primarily to justify the colonial process. But what is less perceptible is how, even relatively long after colonisation, the colonial mindset can still shape the outlook of former colonisers on the ex-colonised, and that of the former colonised communities on themselves.

Addressing Challenges to Sustainability and Consolidation around the World (Washington: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 2009).

²³ For discussions of China as an economic role model, see, for example, Diana Ntono, "Development: Lessons from the Chinese economy," *The Herald Online*, February 3, 2012, accessed April 27, 2012, http://www.herald.co.zw/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=32987:development-lessons-from-the-chinese-economy&catid=39:opinion-a-analysis&Itemid=132; and Martyn Davies, "How China Is Influencing Africa's Development," (OECD Development Centre, Paris, 2010), accessed April 27, 2012, <http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/34/39/45068325.pdf>. The economic success of Asian and South American dictatorships is very praised by the renowned Zambian economist Dambisa Moyo, who asserts, "far from being a prerequisite for economic growth, democracy can hamper development" and, therefore, "what poor countries at the lowest rungs of economic development need is not a multi-party democracy, but in fact a decisive benevolent dictator" to implement the necessary economic reforms; *Dead Aid: Why Aid Is Not Working and How There Is Another Way for Africa* (London: Penguin, 2010), 42.

²⁴ Sylvie Aboa-Bradwell, "The Democratic Nature of African Societies," African Peoples Advocacy, April 24, 2011, accessed April 29, 2012, <http://www.apadvocacy.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/04/The-Democratic-Nature-of-African-Societies.pdf>. Many of the ideas expressed in that piece are reproduced in this section because, once more, it is this author's hope that the forthcoming Madrid conference and publication of the present paper will provide a wider, more powerful platform for the dissemination and discussion of these ideas.

The myth of African rulers as intrinsically undemocratic and tyrannical permeates the frequent references in Western media and books to dictators like Robert Mugabe, Idi Amin Dada, Jean-Bédél Bokassa or Mobutu Sese Seko as “African big men”, “African strong men” and “African despots”. The journalists and writers who use these expressions are often well-read, educated and informed people. They know as well as this writer that without initial support from Western and other non-African countries, many of these tyrants would never have achieved power, or would not have been able to rule for a long time without being ousted by popular revolts. But through their constant use of the adjective “African” to describe these dictators, they are, consciously or unconsciously, attributing their existence to their African-ness, rather than to external circumstances.

Africans’ internalisation of the myth of the typically dictatorial nature of their rulers manifests itself in many ways. One of the most damaging is the tendency of countless Africans to support dictators who are using African nationalism as a ploy to perpetuate themselves in power. Some of these tyrants are, like Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe, genuine nationalists who, unlike Nelson Mandela, have failed to make the transition from freedom fighters to democratic leaders of their people. Others, such as Laurent Gbagbo of Côte d’Ivoire, have resorted to an opportunistic exploitation of a nationalist discourse after failing out with their former Western allies.²⁵ A lot of Africans who are often eager to criticise the slaughter of African people and the looting of African wealth by Western colonisers and neo-imperialists, are unwilling to chastise Mugabe, Gbagbo, and other African rulers who have committed these crimes as well, on the basis that they are, or were, ruling in an African fashion to defend African interests.

The internationalisation of the misrepresentation of African societies as fundamentally undemocratic and tyrannical is also evident in the tendency of many Africans to reject democracy as a Western invention that is alien to Africa. Other Africans, who have also internalised this misconception, but who are eager to embrace democracy, are unable to imagine that modern African countries can successfully incorporate elements of traditional African structures of government into a modern democratic system.

As an organisation committed to the democratisation of Africa, the AU must contribute towards the correction of this myth by urging Africans to take inspiration from this

²⁵ For an analysis of Laurent Gbagbo’s “nationalism” see, for instance, Giulia Piccolino, “David against Goliath in Côte d’Ivoire? Laurent Gbagbo’s War against Global Governance,” *African Affairs* 111.442 (2012): 1-23. Piccolino dignifies Gbagbo’s misuse of nationalism with the name of “souverainisme”.

continent's democratic past, and by highlighting the age-old tradition of adherence to democratic principles inherent in many pre-colonial African societies. For instance, the widespread existence of discussion trees, the agora-like places where, in most African villages, people often assemble to debate important issues and, when necessary, vote to determine what to do, bears witness to the centuries-old practice of democracy throughout Africa. The rulers of the Mali Kingdom (13th -17th centuries) were able to keep their empire united not by relying on dictatorial rule, but by resorting to a highly decentralised and democratic form of administration. Eligible voters in villages, towns and cities were allowed to elect their own chiefs. These chiefs then had the power to elect the governors of the provinces. The county-level administrators were, in turn, chosen by the governors of the provinces. Many other pre-colonial African states, such as the Kingdom of Kongo (1390 - 1914) and the Songhai Empire (1340-1591) were also based on democratic principles and frameworks.²⁶

Admittedly, by modern standards, neither pre-colonial African kingdoms and empires, nor ancient Athens, nor pre-modern Western monarchies, nor the Aztec or Chinese empires, nor any other past empires, would be considered truly democratic societies. For instance, the enslavement and ritual killing of other human beings were practised in most, if not all of these places. Where voting existed, several groups, often women and members of the lower classes, were not allowed to exercise this right.

However, the presence of a few democratic elements, such as the capacity of eligible voters to attend debates and vote on specific issues, and the existence of democratic mechanics, are used to assert the democratic nature of ancient Athens. Equally, the AU should highlight the presence of many democratic elements in pre-colonial African societies to assert their democratic nature. Such a stance will enable the AU to uphold democracy as an intrinsic African form of government and, in so doing, allow this organisation to act as a springboard for a new vision aimed at promoting democratic accountability in Africa in the 21st century.

²⁶ For studies of the Mali Kingdom, see, for instance, Joseph Ki-Zerbo, *Histoire de l'Afrique noire: D'hier a demain* (Paris: Hatier, 1978); Daniel Chu and Elliott Skinner, *A Glorious Age in Africa: The Story of Three Great African Empires* (Trenton: Africa World, 1995). For the Kongo Kingdom, see Ann Hilton, *The Kingdom of Kongo* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985); Jan Vansina, *Les anciens royaumes de la savane* (Léopoldville: Université Lovanium, 1965), and Basil Davidson, *A History of East and Central Africa to the Late Nineteenth Century* (New York: Doubleday, 1969). For the Songhai Empire, see Sékéné Mody Cissoko, *Tombouctou et l'empire Songhay: epanouissement du Soudan nigerien aux XVe-XVIe siècle* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1996), and John O. Hunwick, *Timbuktu and the Songhay Empire: Al-Sa'dī's Ta'rikh Al-sūdān down to 1613 and other Contemporary Documents*, Leiden: Brill Academic, 1999).

3.2 Towards a New Vision for Africa in the 21st Century

To strengthen its case for the democratisation of Africa in the 21st century, the AU should relentlessly highlight the devastating impact that the denial of the democratic nature of pre-colonial African societies has had on modern African countries. Convinced that democracy was (a) too complex and extrinsic a system for African populations to master, and (b) contrary to their interests, former Western colonisers colluded with their African puppets and allies to impose dictatorial regimes on these populations for decades. The need to stop the spread of communism and prevent the collapse of the artificial states bequeathed by the colonisers also contributed to the proliferation of tyrannical forms of government that were, in reality, alien to African people.

Even most Pan-Africanist leaders who were fighting to liberate African populations from colonial rule failed to grant basic freedoms and human rights to their compatriots once they became heads of state. This was partly attributable to the lure of absolute power as well as often well-founded fear of neo-colonial plots, and partly due to the “emergence of the pan-African movement outside the [African] continent itself.”²⁷ Although many African nationals first came into contact with Pan-Africanism in democratic Western countries such as the UK and the USA, they tended to view democracy with suspicion, as a form of government practised by the oppressors. Thus, some embraced communism instead.

While the contribution of communism and communist countries to the liberation struggle of Africans is undeniable, the adoption of communist-style rule by the first post-colonial African leaders has proved extremely damaging to African populations. As ruler of Ghana, the first Sub-Saharan African country to gain independence in 1957, Kwame Nkrumah had the stature and moral authority necessary to be an inspiration and a model to subsequent African leaders. He could have become a powerful champion of adherence to a multi-party system, promotion of democratic accountability, as well as respect of human rights and rule of law. But he believed that “Ghana’s economic independence and the objective of socialism cannot be achieved without decisive party leadership”,²⁸ and proceeded to ban opposition groups. The coup d’état that ousted him from power in 1966 was a manifestation

²⁷ Richard J. Reid, *A History of Modern Africa: 1800 to the Present* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 257.

²⁸ Kwame Nkrumah, *Africa Must Unite* (London: Panaf Books, 1974), 128.

of his unpopularity due to, amongst other factors, his “corrupt and dictatorial government.”²⁹ Thus, Nkrumah set Ghana along the disastrous path of single-party unaccountability, dictatorial abuses, corruption and excesses, popular dissatisfaction, successive military coups, and economic trials triggered or worsened by political instability that was to be followed by the overwhelming majority of African countries between the 1960s and 1990s.

Kwame Nkrumah’s contribution to the achievement of the independence of Ghana and other African states is outstanding, and should always be acknowledged and praised. Both his identification of neo-colonisation as a major challenge to the sovereignty and economic development of post-colonial Africa, and his advocacy of African unity as the best way to overcome this challenge were prescient, and remain as valid in the 21st century as they were in the 1960s.

However, it is no longer enough to merely denounce Africa’s neo-colonisation or state that “Africa’s way out of this cul de sac of being an economic and political punching bag for the East and West” is simply “to unite. Africa must unite or we perish together.”³⁰ The AU and Africans eager to protect their continent from foreign aggression and exploitation must avoid lapsing into a mentality of chronic victimhood that consists in just complaining about imperialistic interference, or parroting solutions prescribed by past anti-imperialist heroes, without highlighting why these solutions have so far remained ineffective or unfulfilled. Given the basic human reality that in general, the strongest will always seek to dominate the weakest, the duty of responsible African leaders, Pan-Africanists and other concerned people is to outline and implement effective ways of shielding Africa against foreign domination. Furthermore, unless it rests on solid foundations based on strategies clearly aimed at correcting past mistakes, even unity would not save Africa. It would just prove to be a multiplication of unsolved challenges, as has so far been the case in big African countries such as the DRC, Nigeria and Sudan.

In addition, the AU and the supporters of this institution must admit once and for all that Nkrumah’s dictatorial style of government was not conducive to the realisation of his vision of a united, peaceful, prosperous and independent Africa. They should acknowledge the negative impact of this tyrannical style on African populations and then, take bold and resolute steps to effectively support the democratisation of the entire African continent.

²⁹ Adi and Sherwood, *Pan-African History*, 145.

³⁰ Ansah, “Libya: A Wake-up Call for African Unity.”

Corruption was and remains rampant in most post-colonial African states, not because Africans are more corrupt or corruptible than other human beings, but because of the fundamentally corrupt nature of the dictatorial style of government imposed on African populations shortly after the independence of their countries. Power was not granted to rulers democratically elected by African people and thus, accountable to them. It was often given to tyrants chosen, bought, backed and armed by foreigners to defend foreign interests, instead of the interests of African people.

Having achieved power through corrupt, undemocratic and brutal means, these tyrants knew that they lacked legitimacy, and could only rule through corruption and brutal repression. With no independent national parliamentary, judiciary or any other mechanics to rein them in, they and their cronies were free to plunder their countries at will and keep their loot in banks and territories controlled by their foreign backers. Thus, although they constantly justified their dictatorial rule by asserting that it was necessary to prioritise the pursuit of development over democracy, they gave their oppressed compatriots nothing but abject poverty and corruption.

Democracy is far from being a panacea for all Africa's on-going problems. It is not an event that can happen and satisfy people overnight, but a process that needs perpetual nurturing. However, at a time when African countries are increasingly influenced and seduced by the dictatorial yet economically successful Chinese model, the AU must provide an alternative vision. The cornerstone of the aforementioned vision should be the acknowledgement that (a) historically, many African societies did thrive under democratic systems for centuries, and (b) dictatorial regimes have utterly failed to deliver economic development, peace and prosperity in post-colonial Africa.

Furthermore, while corruption is as rife in dictatorial China as it is in post-colonial African countries that have adopted dictatorial systems, the corrupt Chinese elites are investing primarily in their motherland, but corrupt Africans are doing so in Western and other foreign nations. This is due to the fact many Chinese become members of the elite classes after distinguishing themselves by their patriotic zeal, whereas post-colonial African elites are mainly made up of people who have distinguished themselves by their eagerness to loot their countries to serve foreign and selfish personal interests. Only a democratic system with provisions for democratic mechanisms as transparent and robust as those that existed in many pre-colonial African territories can change this sorry state of affairs.

The AU and concerned Africans must be aware that pre-colonial African kingdoms and societies can no longer be replicated, not least because almost all post-colonial African states have to contend with the problems inherent in the forced co-existence of previously separated ethnic, cultural and religious communities. But this reality strengthens, rather than weakens the case for the nurturing of democracy in Africa. The decades of instability, civil wars, coups and ethnic conflicts that have characterised almost all dictatorial post-colonial African countries clearly show that the dictatorial system has not been, and will never be able to provide adequate solutions to these problems.

The way forward is the promotion of democracy all over Africa. Unlike dictatorship, which is intrinsically arbitrary, unfair and thus, likely to fuel resentment and future retributions from aggrieved communities, true democracy offers justice and opportunities for all. It binds different groups of people together with the promise that if they put aside their differences and work together towards the development of their nation, they will all benefit in a fair and equitable way. This is what has happened in ethnically diverse yet peaceful and democratic countries such as Botswana and Mauritius. Even where decades of autocratic brutality, injustice and corruption have led to ethnic divisions and wars, democracy offers people a way of overcoming their differences, healing their communities and working together for a better future. This is what is currently happening in Somaliland.

Democratic systems are, of course, not immune to corruption, as the constant disclosure of corruption cases in France, Greece, the UK, and other long-established democracies shows. But even corrupt elites in democratic African states will be far more likely to invest in their countries than corrupt elites in dictatorial nations. For the former will know that (a) they will not be arbitrarily deprived of their wealth; and (b) they will have to serve local and national interests to win votes and retain the support of their compatriots.

The AU and other supporters of the democratisation of Africa must realise that implementing genuine democracy in the African continent will be far from easy, and will take a very long time in many states. For it will mean fighting to replace the corrupt, uncaring elites bequeathed by the recent post-colonial system with new, principled and conscientious leaders, and the corrupt elites will resist that as fiercely as possible. It took Westerners centuries to replace the feudal system with a more egalitarian society, and the battle to end slavery is still on-going in many parts of the world. But the AU should be

deterred neither by the enormity of this task, nor the challenges ahead, nor the time it may take to improve things.

There are concrete initiatives that the AU can help implement to nurture and accelerate the emergence of new, democratic leaders in the African continent. For example, this organisation could curb the current tendency of many African leaders to perpetuate themselves in power through removal of term limits by banning this practice, and by treating heads of state who indulge in it as coup leaders. Another way of achieving this objective would be for the AU to develop and implement programmes offering grants to youths from African states that are experiencing difficulties making the transition from dictatorship to true democracy. These youths would be sent to African countries where democracy has been successfully implemented, so that they could learn from these countries. Botswana, Mauritius, Ghana and Somaliland could be taken as democratic role models. One of the many advantages of these programmes would be to help grantees overcome the myth of democracy as an alien system that Africans cannot master. Through such initiatives, the AU could greatly assist in replacing the post-colonial system of government of self-interested Africans by self-interested Africans for self-interested Africans with democratic, responsible and accountable African governments dedicated to the service of their people.

Conclusion

As the AU celebrates its ten years of existence, this organisation and its supporters must acknowledge its shortcomings. So far, it has failed to shield Africa from neo-colonisation, overcome this continent's marginalisation in international affairs, and promote genuine African unity. In addition, it has managed to eradicate neither conflicts in many parts of Africa, nor extreme poverty and lack of good governance in most African states.

To avoid becoming either a toothless bulldog or a dictators' club like its predecessor, the AU must undertake a thorough reassessment of the Pan-African ideology that sustains it. This reappraisal would enable the AU to realise that in order to win the battle for Africa's soul and be in a position to effectively overcome the challenges facing this continent in the 21st century, it must become the standard-bearer of a vision aimed at upholding democracy as an intrinsic form of African government. The promotion of this vision will act as a catalyst

for the emergence of genuinely independent and prosperous African countries. It will also unite African populations through their belief in a common set of democratic values, and endow them with an everlasting sense of identity, purpose and direction.

The African Diaspora too, which is recognised by the AU as the 6th Region of the African continent, could benefit enormously from the promotion and realisation of this vision. Many democratic Western countries such as Britain, France, and the USA, have millions of citizens of African origins that are alienated, and do not participate in democratic processes. This alienation is attributable to a wide variety of reasons, which include the persistence of the misconception that democracy is alien to African people. Dispelling this myth will enable the AU to contribute towards a better integration of African Diaspora communities in these democratic societies. Furthermore, just as the African Diaspora played a key role in triggering the decolonisation of the African continent in the past, current members of the African Diaspora with links to their countries of heritage could prove crucial in supporting the democratisation, development and renaissance of Africa.

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