

# Reclaiming the Pan-African Agenda

Pan-Africanism has lately become the object of derision and denigration, partly understandable but largely mistaken.

Among the legion of pro-democracy advocates active on the streets of Twitter and Facebook, Pan-Africanism is an empty slogan that African rulers use as cover against scrutiny and accountability especially from our western patrons.

There is a gross misunderstanding of what Pan-Africanism is about, its origins and history. As an idea and movement, Pan-Africanism had its seminal origins among Africa-descended people in the Western hemisphere, in the Caribbean and the United States. It was an emancipatory idea and a liberation agenda anchored in unity and collective action, born from among the enslaved.

The founding programmatic agenda was abolition of the despicable business of slavery and enslavement, the reassertion of the full dignity of the African person and reclaiming the right to be free.

This agenda whose earliest victory was the liberation of the black people of Saint Domingue and Santa Domingo, now Haiti and the Dominican Republic, spread from the diaspora to mother continent during the struggle against colonial occupation and the quest for independence at the start of the last century. The idea and ideals of Pan-Africanism were at the centre of struggles for independence and the end to European colonial occupation of the continent.

At the dawn of independence, the new torchbearers of the Pan-African ideal were among the leading and most influential voices in reimagining a new Africa in the shadows of decolonisation. From Abdel Gamal Nasser and Patrice Lumumba to

Kwame Nkrumah and Julius Nyerere, Africa's independence political elites had an unmistakable commitment to the cause of a united front in tackling common problems.

They drew their inspiration from pioneering thinkers of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century Pan-African community astride in the diaspora: Marcus Garvey, W.E.B DuBois, Eric Williams, CLR James and especially George Padmore. It was Dr Nkrumah who perceptively declared that the independence of the Gold Coast was meaningless unless it was tied to the total liberation of the continent.

With inimitable prescience, Nkrumah and his generation fully understood that African nations acting on their own under the narrow allures of sovereign independence were woefully incapable of tackling the myriad socioeconomic problems they faced particularly considering the global environment where external interests were at odds with African aspirations.

The founding of the Organisation of African Unity in 1963 was the consummation of the desire for a concerted continental endeavour for cooperation, coordination and collaboration.

However, the OAU was no more than a compromise and a second rate option to the real United States of Africa that Nkrumah rooted for, with the understanding that a confederated Africa held the promise of strength and true independence in the face of Cold War muscle-flexing and manoeuvres.

The immediate objective of the OAU was to root out apartheid in South and Southwest Africa, end white minority and racist rule in Rhodesia and bring to an end the obstinate Portuguese occupation of Angola, Guinea, Mozambique and Cape Verde. The anticolonial guerrillas in these Portuguese colonies had the backing of the OAU and succeeded in wearing down the colonial military, thus gaining independence following a military coup against the Salazar regime in Lisbon in 1974.

In southern Africa, the collective efforts of the OAU and specifically the Front-Line States helped isolate Ian Smith's diabolic government in Southern Rhodesia and the apartheid regime further south. Rhodesia gained independence as Zimbabwe in 1980, Southwest Africa in 1990 as Namibia and South Africa in 1994.

From this anticolonial and political liberation perspective, the OAU's role was profound even though the organisation remained a club of rulers with questionable records and shaky legitimacy back home.

However, as a vehicle for collective continental socioeconomic structural transformation, peace and security, the OAU was a spectacular failure in part because these tasks were for the most part outsourced to regional economic communities that never quite took off in a fundamental way.

The transition from the OAU to the African Union in 2002 was supposed to represent far more than a mere change of name, and in many respects the AU took on an ambitious agenda and pulled off some impressive accomplishments.

For example, the AU's tough stance against coup-makers and unconstitutional changes of government contributed immensely to the decline of military seizures of power, a phenomenon that was routine under the helpless watch of the OAU. Also, inter-Africa peacekeeping operations coordinated through the AU and the collective efforts to fight pandemics have had some laudable results.

The OAU had deep flaws and grave failings. The AU has underperformed and is often undercut by the selfish actions of African governments that, for example, pursue bilateral deals with China and Western powers particularly on security and economic matters even after the adaption of the African Continental Free Trade Agreement.

What's more, it is hard to overlook the rhetorical harkening

to Pan-Africanism to deflect questions of accountability and just government. But those who ventilate and whinge about Pan-Africanism, dismissing its philosophical currency and normative value are either ignorant of history or are disingenuous about Africa's continued marginality in the global structures of power, domination and imperialism.

Without strategic coordination and collective action to address cross-border crises but also build common positions in engaging with the outside world, Africa will remain a continent of cheap extraction and exploitation in the service of western economic interests made possible by local agents.

The problems that animated and inspired independence time Pan-African thinkers and leaders are arguably more palpable today than sixty years ago. The need for a New International Economic Order of fairness and justice in economic engagement that the eminent Jamaican Prime Minister, Michael Manly, articulated and advocated for fifty years ago is more urgently needed today.