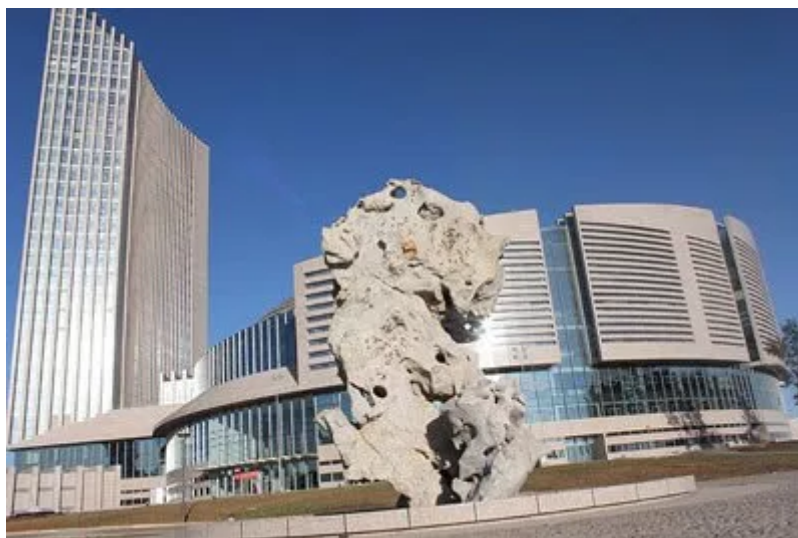


Let's end the African Union's monopoly on the unity issue

LSE alumnus Waiswa Nkwanga argues that the African Union has failed in its objective of creating a truly unified continent.

The fiftieth anniversary of the African Union (AU) has generated a brief debate about the organisation's performance. The verdict seems to be that it has been disappointing. However, there has been little discussion on the central and sensitive question: why do we need the AU?



The AU's new headquarters in Addis Ababa was built with Chinese money

It is understandable that this question is often avoided. For one thing the AU remains the only continental organisation that brings all African states together. For another, despite its less than mediocre performance overall, the AU championed the independence of many African states, a not so easy task by any standard. It is this very important albeit time specific achievement that makes some Africans believe that it could deliver on the African unity dream too.

In his [article in the Guardian](#), Kenyan novelist, poet and playwright, Ngugi wa Thiong'o weighed in on this question arguing, "It is better to have a skeleton of a union than no union at all...Despite its failures and weaknesses, the AU keeps the dream alive." And he may be right, but as I see it, this obsession with the dream has rendered African people passive, saddling us with an expensive, inefficient, and corrupt top-down organisation, which exists only to serve the interests of its 54 core members.

Why should fifty-four individuals, some of whom are illegitimate rulers of their states, have a stronghold on the dream of a billion people? Why should we let backward-looking men dictate the fate of our continent and its entire people?

This debate is not new. In fact, it has been around since the early 1960s before the AU was founded.

Brief background: the AU was born out of lengthy deliberations and debates between opposing factions among African states and revolutionary movements.

However, by 1963, two years after the assassination of the DR Congo leader Patrice Lumumba, these factions put their divisions aside for the sake of African unity. Nonetheless, as historical social scientist Immanuel Wallerstein explains, two rival groups emerged within the core of the

revolutionary movement. The main difference between them was not ideological but, for lack of a better word, class. In other words, those who were in positions of power and those in opposition.

At this time, Wallerstein explains, African leaders such as Ghana's Kwame Nkrumah, Modibo Keita of Mali and Senegal's Leopold Senghor dominated the revolutionary movement. They were primarily concerned about the liberation of the rest of the continent and thus viewed any sort of opposition as an impediment to African unity. They, therefore, encouraged states to put their factional differences aside in the name of defeating the greater evil—colonialism. In time, many of these countries became one-party states with all opposition parties banned.

The latter on the other hand, saw class divisions as the biggest threat to African unity. In an editorial in 1963, Nigerien politician Djibo Bakary warned: "Finally, in no way must African unity become a sort of trade-union of men in power who will seek to support one another to resist the popular current." Similarly, earlier in May 1962, Wallerstein explains, the Union of the Peoples of Cameroon (UPC) party made a similar argument in its pamphlet that there was "an Africa of the people and one of the servants" and that the road of true African unity was not that of "fusion of the various factions" as that would "induce African leaders to relegate to the background the fundamental problems of the struggle".

In the end, while the former prevailed, the latter were more accurate in predicting what was to become of the AU. In an act of outright betrayal, when thirty African leaders assembled in Addis Ababa in May 1963, the document they produced read "We, the Heads of African States and Governments". Looking at this portion of the organisation's history, the problem we face in the AU today becomes obvious. In essence, the AU became the organisation where those in positions of power enjoyed total monopoly over its agenda.

The fact that we have an organisation whose "constitution" begins with these words should make us pause for a moment. If we are really serious about African unity then we should make a point to fight for the unity of the people instead of an alliance of states. The two are different.

No one should take this to mean that African governments should not play any part in the struggle for African unity. For both the people and the states need to work together to achieve the dream, but the latter should be subject to the former's aspirations, at least in my view.

Nor, for that matter, does this mean that the AU should go away. The AU can stay in its current form as "a talking shop" for "big-men". What is unacceptable, to me, is an organisation that eliminates or diminishes the importance of people in the struggle for African unity.

Ngugi wa Thiong'o and others may be right when they suggest that we should wait for the AU to deliver the unity dream, but the story of the AU at heart has been that of promoting an alliance of states and organising lavish events for its few "big-men" instead of engaging the masses; not to mention, mortgaging Africa's resources to China. (In 2011, the AU accepted a \$200 million "gift" from China for its headquarters while millions of people are starving.) Waiting will only exacerbate the situation, I'm afraid.

If the dream of African unity is to be realised, and if the continent is to become prosperous and independent—bearing in mind recent events in Libya, Mali and Ivory Coast, the ICC, and military occupations by AFRICOM—the African people must make some tough choices. We can choose to remain under the AU's weak top-down alliance of states, or create a new bottom-up organisation that derives its legitimacy and power directly from the people. But we cannot do both.

