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BLACK AFRICANS MUST TRED CAREFULLY OVER THE USAFRICA PROJECT

News Analysis

By Basil Okafor

In the past nearly five decades since the formation of the Organisation of African Unity, OAU, many Africans have consistently called for closer ties between the nation-states that make up the continent.

After 38 years and feeling it had attained its main goal of African liberation, the 53-nation OAU transformed into an African Union, AU, on October 15, 2001, to ostensibly give the body political and economic teeth, as a first step to greater continental integration and unity.

In furtherance of this ideal, there is a new suggestion to use the forthcoming July 2007 AU summit, to raise the stakes even higher. At the Accra gathering, proponents of the new African continental enterprise are to push for a United States of Africa. In the new arrangement, the entire continent, if the purveyors of this concept have their way, the entire continent would fuse into one sprawling nation, with one army, one currency (much like the European Union) and free movement of people and goods, with no international borders, as they presently exist.

Clearly, the idea of a “United States of Africa” resonates with the aspirations of Africans everywhere, (both at home and in the diaspora) who desire a better Africa. And predictably, the decision to push for a USAfrica at the July summit has drawn spirited responses from the Pan-African public. But it is also instructive to note the respective tones of the varied responses.

In the first ten days of February, following the January 31 announcement of the AU decision, Africans wrote in to a BBC World Service Forum on the topic: “Is African unity a dream worth pursuing?” Of the 32 contributors to the forum, none is actually opposed to unification.

However, they fall into 3 main camps in their attitudes and expectations, namely:

- (A) The enthusiasts (12)—who so desperately want unification that they appear blind to, or uninterested in the landmines on the way to it;
- (B) The sceptics (5)—who don't believe it will happen and, for assorted reasons, dismiss it as a ‘mirage’; and
- (C) The cautious (16)—who want it, but point out some serious problems that need to be disposed of before unification can succeed.

The 32 contributors to the Forum wrote in from: USA 8; Sudan 6; UK 4; Uganda, Ghana, Tanzania 2 each; and 1 each from Cote d'Ivoire, Canada, Cameroon, Liberia, Morocco, Niger, Nigeria and Seychelles.

It is significant that two-thirds of the contributors draw attention to the obstacles to its attainment. Even more significantly, every Sudanese contributor highlighted some obstacle to be overcome. And Sudan is where the attempt to unite Arabs and Black Africans within one state has caused a bitter race war that has lasted more than 50 years. Perhaps the rest of Black Africa has much to learn from Sudan. Sudan has been an experiment in Afro-Arab unification: its experience augurs badly for the USAfrica project.

A key issue raised by the two-thirds majority of the contributors who constitute the sceptics and the cautious, is that of identity. The issues they want to see addressed are as follows:

Who is an African? Do Arabs in North Africa identify with Black Africans or with their white kith and kin in Arabia and the Middle East?

Other obstacles to the idea of USAfrica they raised are:

Colourism: the ingrained Arab contempt for Blacks; the conflict between Pan-Arabism and Pan-Africanism and Arab ambitions to impose Islam on Africans and to Arabise Black Africa.

What principles will this USAfrica follow? Would it be Christian, Muslim or other? Will Muslims accept to be ruled by non-Muslims in the USAfrica? How will obstacles to unification – including tyranny, tribalism, mutual distrust and corruption – be removed?

Contributing from Mahe, the Seychelles, Clement Kuol Biong writes, ‘A veteran Sudanese politician, once compared the Sudan Socialist Union of Jafaar Numeiri’s rule to a shadow tree where we come just to share the shade but what each person under the tree is thinking about is not necessarily the same.

“So how can Africa be united when we are still tribally fragmented and no African leader is interested in uniting his own people? How can African unity become a dream come true when different groupings of the AU have their own hidden agendas?

“The Arabs have never stopped their dream of imposing Islamic culture on African masses by the sword, a practice which is still widespread in Sudan up to today.”

Atina Ndindeng, from Manchester, England, summarises: “African unity is just a mirage because of greed, dishonesty and corruption among the executive whom we hold in such high esteem and should be setting an example, but they are all failures and political demagogues. Shame to most African heads.”

On their part, the enthusiasts, who constitute one-third of the contributors, rest their hope on a dream that, “the United Africa will be a Green Superpower as opposed to a military superpower and eventually be a key player at the table of world affairs instead of a beggar.”

And, as Mark Wood, co-founder of USA4USAfrica, of Greenwood California, puts it, “A United States of Africa can prevent an African apocalypse on the horizon if unification does not happen NOW!”

But what good is any Green Superpower (if ever such utopia is possible for a united Africa) without the military muscle to even defend its farmlands from the sort of marauding invaders that the continent has known since the Arabs conquered and settled in North Africa between 640 and 1400 AD?

Some of the promoters of the USAfrica regard their project as an already done deal. They insist that, despite opposing views, “Africa WILL unite, as one nation. As a matter of fact, it will happen this July at the upcoming African Union summit in Ghana.”

“The tide,” they maintain, “cannot be turned at this point as the unification of Africa is undeniably in motion...all arguments opposing a united Africa are rendered moot at this point because Africans have finally mandated themselves that they will unite and work out the details from a united position as opposed to being divided.”

These promoters have already designed a flag for the USAfrica and chosen its first president for us:

“Our Mandate is for the African Union, in 2007, to form an official United States of Africa with Kofi Annan, (whose term ended December 31st 2006) departing UN Secretary General, being installed as the United States of Africa’s First President in much the same fashion George Washington was ‘installed’ as the first U.S. American President. God willing.”

As the promoters see it, all that is left for them to do is to propagandise and manipulate us like sheep to acquiesce. How? By, according to them:

1. “Organizing Town Hall meetings to get public support for the Federation and to get ideas on how it could be created.
“Town Hall meetings should begin soon inside Africa and outside Africa. Town Hall meetings are [to] provide suggestions on how to implement Continental Union Government (United States of Africa). Not a discussion about the Federation, but how to implement it.”
2. “Recruitment of celebrities to join the cause and give support and voice to the United States Of Africa. From America: recruit Oprah, Obama, Angelina Jolie, Danny Glover.”
3. Contacting “top hip-hop superstars to mobilise for the United States of Africa”.

By proceeding without a known and public mandate from the people of Africa and, especially, by drawing attention only to what they naively consider the potential benefits of USAfrica, and by trying to restrict their town-hall discussions to implementation alone, these promoters are behaving like a used car salesman who doesn’t want the customer to raise awkward questions about faulty aspects of the car.

However, the issues raised by the sceptics and the cautious, the two-third majority on the BBC Forum, suggest that it is time for Black Africans to wake up and do the hard thinking and ask--and honestly answer--the tough questions we have avoided for 50 years about the sanity of unifying Black Africans and Arabs under one continental government.

For example, why is a USAfrica necessary? What problems will it solve for Black Africa that the OAU could not and the AU cannot, solve?

Who are the shadowy godfathers of this USAfrica project and what is their hidden agenda?

The Forum comments indicate that many ordinary Black Africans are doing some of this hard thinking. The AU presidents should follow suit and do, and be seen to do, the same. They should not rush to implement this shady project before they and the public have, together, thought things through and in the greatest detail.

There was no popular debate before the formation of the AU and the adoption of NEPAD by Africa's presidents. Will there be a full and free debate by the people before this USAfrica project proceeds any further? Will the promoters, seen and unseen, of this USAfrica, allow it?

Regardless of the promoters, let us all debate it, every aspect of it, not just how to implement it. Let us all debate the merits and demerits of continental government and do so for the next five years, or till we arrive at an enlightened consensus.

Let us debate it in light of Black people's experience in Sudan, Mauritania and the rest of the Afro-Arab borderlands. And, in light of the four decades of the OAU/AU, too. Let the AU summit on it be postponed for at least five years, while the people debate it.

Before we, the Black African people, instruct the AU presidents on how to vote, let us examine the motives, objectives, sponsors – overt, as well as covert – modalities and feasibility of this USAfrica and do so in the context of what Black Africa needs to survive and prosper in this century.

Caution should be our watchword for, as Abednego Majack – a contributor from Rumbek, Sudan – puts it, succinctly, 'United States of Africa? The phrase sounds good but the question is, do we really see ourselves as African, regardless of our colonial boundaries, religions and regional groupings?

“The AU must be very serious when considering how to make African unity attractive otherwise the continent will still remain in two halves, sub-Saharan Africa and North Africa and problems will develop along that fault line.”

Before this dream of continental union turns into a nightmare for us and our descendants, let us investigate its likely consequences for us, Black Africans. Prevention is better than cure, as they say!