

# Most African Leaders Have No Interest in a real African Union

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The late President Mobutu Sese Seko of former Zaire once declared that the North African countries, which pride themselves on their Arabic descent, should be excluded from the then Organization of African Unity. Mobutu's rule was, of course, deeply flawed, but he was not alone within the Pan-African movement in such thinking. The antagonism between the blacks of sub-Saharan Africa and the inhabitants of the continent's north remains a reality that impedes the prospect of any union between them. Northern hostility, separatism, and racism toward the southerners are at the center of this split. However, in our current era of political correctness, outright separation between the north and the south remains unmentionable.

In declaring that Egypt was an Arab republic, President Gamel Abdel Nasser was falsifying history, erasing 3000 years of a culture neatly intertwined with black Africa. Indeed, for nearly three centuries, from 950 to 663 BC, black pharaohs and queens such as Tii from the "land of Kush" – today's black Sudan – ruled Egypt. More grotesquely, when the Americans decided to finance a film on the life of Anwar Sadat, the Egyptians objected because the actor chosen to play Sadat was black.

Similarly, when Morocco quit the OAU in 1984, it dreamed of European Union membership. Sudan's ruling class – descendants of Arab slaves – have no qualms about bombing, killing and displacing millions of their black citizens in the south and now in the Darfur region, with the backing of the Arab League. And when Libyan leader Colonel Muammar Khadafi, disappointed by the Pan-Arabism he advocated, turned to championing Pan-Africanism, his people continued to riot to chase out black immigrants. Mauritania's leaders quit ECOWAS, the West African regional grouping, to join the union formed by the North African countries.

These countries' attitude reflects that of the Arabs themselves. When al-Qaeda decided to take on the United States, it targeted the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, killing more than 260 people. With the exception of 12 US citizens, all were black civilians, while more than 4,000 Kenyans and Tanzanians were injured. Justifying the killings of black Africans, a leading Arab commentator invoked Stalin: "One can't make an omelet without breaking eggs."

In Saudi Arabia, the racism against black Muslims is so acute that one wonders if it is worth performing a pilgrimage to Mecca, one of the five pillars of the Muslim faith. As a Muslim and a world traveler, I have never experienced as much ostracism as I did in Saudi Arabia as a pilgrim.

Why then, should sub-Saharan Africans keep alive the mirage of a union with the North African countries? The Egyptians, with a historical civilization second to none in terms of achievements in all walks of life, want desperately to associate with the Arabs, with whom they have no kinship other than colonization. Likewise, the other people of North African countries are Berbers who, less than half a century ago, were given cash incentives to learn Arabic.

The African Union needs thorough rethinking. Diversity must be a source of richness, not antagonism, and countries that favor the latter must be excluded. This would entail the dismantling of the African Union in its current form, which in any case is built on shaky grounds, since its designers seemed to favor plagiarizing the European Union – hardly a bureaucratic model worth emulating.

But African leaders have no interest in a real African Union. They derive their powers from the fragmentation of the continent, and one cannot expect them to renounce that stance for the sake of the well-being of the masses. Consequently, a United States of Africa would have to stem from the grassroots, through existing institutions of civil society like professional associations, trade unions, and other non-governmental organizations.

It is worth remembering that the people who were instrumental in establishing the best and most enduring union of states in history, the United States of America, were political activists, not heads of states. In Latin America, the only breakthrough that dented post-independence domination by the descendants of European colonizers came from a black freedom fighter and unifier, Simon Bolivar, who united the region before being forced into exile in Jamaica. Now, Bolivar has an heir in Hugo Chávez, and the Latin American political landscape is changing at breakneck speed under his inspiration and leadership.

Inspired leadership is crucial to any process of nation-building, and Africans should look to figures such as Bolivar, Martin Luther King, Jr., Georges Padmore, W.E.B. Dubois, Kwame Nkrumah, and Cheikh Anta Diop to mount a resistance movement against their mostly corrupt and incompetent leaders (a Herculean task, indeed). Only then could they fulfill the dream of a common African identity and the establishment of a United States of Africa.