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Cover Story
Qaddafi's Call for a "United States of Africa":
No Longer Just an Interesting Idea
The African World
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It is easy for many people in the global North to write off Libya's leader, Colonel Muammar Qaddafi, as an erratic dreamer. But this 'dreamer' is now the chairman of the African Union, a rotating position admittedly, but one with significance. It is in this role that Qaddafi plans on pushing with all deliberate speed for the unification of Africa into a "United States of Africa."

Although this has long been Qaddafi's dream, this is not one that he originated. Throughout the African World, for most of the 20th century and into the 21st, there have been those who have dreamed, suggested and/or fought for a unified Africa; Marcus Garvey, Kwame Nkrumah, W.E.B. Dubois and Kwame Ture being only four of the better known proponents. Yet these dreams have been frustrated by various factors, not the least being virulent opposition from the countries of the global North (particularly Western Europe and the United States of America). Such opposition was not limited to harsh rhetoric, but included an active policy of overthrowing governments that were led by proponents of African unity as well as covert operations directed at destroying organizations that advanced the Pan African vision.

Qaddafi's insistence on the need for African unity has gained significant international attention. The mainstream media, however, has gone out of its way to bring forward anonymous African leaders who are quoted as dismissing the call for a "United States

of Africa" as, at best, premature and, at worst, delusional.

But is it either?

Irrespective of Col. Qaddafi's intentions, his call for African unity could not be more timely, albeit still quite difficult to realize. The current global economic crisis demonstrates that the approach toward economic development pushed by the USA and Western Europe has not only been a failure for the global North, but has been especially disastrous for the countries of the global South. Africa continues to lag behind other continents on most indices, particularly in the realm of poverty, but also in healthcare and infrastructure development.

What Qaddafi, and those who traveled this road before him, recognize is that the boundaries the current African nation-states inherited from their colonial era have been central to the underdevelopment of the African continent. In some cases, the nation-states are too small to build a sustainable economy. In other cases the nation-state boundaries ignore historic tribal/ethnic boundaries, often leading to near endless ethnic conflict.

In fact, when Qaddafi criticizes multi-party democracy in Africa, the grain of truth in his remarks is that multi-party democracy in Africa has often meant political organization on the basis of ethnicity rather than on ideological or political bases. [Note: this is NOT a suggestion on my part that a single-party state is a panacea resolving these issues. Many African countries utilized the single-party state model, but as Congolese theoretician Ernest Wamba-dia-Wamba pointed out decades ago, this only meant that the multi-party struggle took place WITHIN the single party].

For Africa to break with its past of subordination to the global North, it will need unification. Although the African Union, the current body - and successor to the Organization for African Unity - designed to coordinate the work of African countries, is to a great extent modeled on the European Union, African unity will not look anything like that found in Europe, or North America for that matter. Nor will African unity be something that can simply be proclaimed into existence, despite what Col. Qaddafi might otherwise hope.

What could, however, speed up the process toward a productive resolution would be concerted attention by the AU on the building of stronger regional bodies, and specifically, the development of coordinated regional economic development programs. In this sense, unity can become that "change we can believe in" rather than an abstract notion.


Col. Qaddafi should remember the experiences in the Arab World with which he is intimately familiar. Whether it was the unification of Syria and Egypt into the short-lived United Arab Republic, or the efforts to expand the U.A.R. to include Iraq (all in the early 1960s), these efforts at badly needed unity failed to address not only external opposition from the USA and Western Europe, but internal tensions. Top-down unification, in the absence of building trust which crosses national boundaries, most especially trust between the peoples of these nation-states, along with a pro-active approach toward cross-border economic strategy, will be hollow at best, and at worst, lead to despair.


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