

Pan-Africanism of the 21st Century – Challenges and Prospects



David Maimela

holds a degree in Political Science majoring in International Relations, an honours degree in the same field and is currently pursuing a Masters programme in International Relations focusing on SA's Foreign Policy. Among other honours, he holds the Mandela Rhodes Scholarship from the Mandela Rhodes Foundation for the class of 2007. David is currently Researcher at the Mapungubwe Institute for Strategic Reflections (MISTRA) in the Political Economy Faculty

Introduction

At the beginning of the second decade of the 21st century, various encouraging storylines on Africa are beginning to emerge. At an economic level, there seem to be positive signs and numerous reports point to Africa as a 'new growth frontier'. At a political level, peace and stability are increasingly becoming a trend, although challenges remain and new conflicts do still emerge. More than 60% of the African population is youth – a demographic dividend which is a double edge sword. In terms of class formation, the 'middle class' seems to be on the rise.

These storylines and emerging trends are indeed telling a story of promise – Africa reawakening – but can Africa claim the 21st century and what must constitute the agenda to claim the 21st century as an 'African century'?

If the 21st century is really to be an 'African century', the promise must be met with clear intent, reassertion of pan-Africanism as a liberating concept and agenda, and a serious leadership renewal programme. But most importantly, what must a 21st century pan-Africanism look like in practice and who can be the champions and to what end? In the end, if this is not done, the promising decades ahead may return Africa to the 'lost decades' and spell déjà vu and re-marginalisation of the continent.

The discussion follows an analytical framework which helps us understand what is happening, where we are and what Africa needs to do. The framework is three dimensional: structure, leadership and social agency. Before we go further, there is a need to define what is meant by 'pan-Africanism' as a concept and practice.

What is Pan-Africanism?

Pan-Africanism emerged at the end of nineteenth century as an idea and later an action programme by Africans in colonial territories – a response to slavery, imperialism, colonialism and racism. From the onset, pan-Africanism became an anti-thesis to European imperialism, domination and racism. As Thompson explains, 'the idea of pan-Africanism was intended to challenge the main activities of European imperialists, namely, the slave trade, European colonisation of Africa and racism'. Basically this was an ideological response to the 1884/85 Berlin Conference.

As Tondi argues, four themes are discernible through the evolution of pan-Africanist thought and practice in the 20th century (i) Pan-Africanism: a universal expression of black pride and achievement; (ii) pan-Africanism: a return to Africa by the people of African descent living in the diaspora; (iii) pan-Africanism: a harbinger of liberation; and (iv) pan-Africanism: the political unification of the continent.

For 20th century African struggles, pan-Africanism meant a ‘vehicle that was used to reclaim African history and rediscover the African Personality that had been subjugated under European cultural domination’.

Achievements of pan-Africanism thus far

Pan-Africanism had twin tasks in relation to correcting the historical injustices of slavery, colonialism and racism: free Africa and unite Africa and her people. It is deliberate that the phrase her people is included in the quest for unity. It is a conscious acknowledgement of the fact that ultimately, the unity of officialdom (states) is incomplete without the unity of the people, the defeat of tribalism and of narrow territorial African nationalism, free movement of the people, and the restoration of the African Personality.

So far, there has been African cooperation, mostly at official state and economic sector level, but no real unity and integration has taken place yet in a manner that realises the pan-African dream of one continent, one people and one destiny.

Remember that the centuries’ long subjugation of the black race meant the suppression, belittlement and destruction of Africa and the African. Necessarily, the rebuilding of Africa requires the restoration of African humanity in all facets of life and the elevation of Africa back onto the global stage as an equal people, culture (human civilisation) and geographic space.

In essence, when the so-called developed societies (developed on the basis of the underdevelopment of Africa) focus on 21st century crises of environmental degradation, cyclical global capitalist crises, biogenetic revolution and consequent social upheavals, Africa has a double burden of simultaneously confronting these and the challenges of neo-colonialism in all its manifestations.

The year 1994 signalled the end of official colonialism in Africa and Apartheid in South Africa, bar Western Sahara. The end of colonialism naturally meant that the process of decolonisation would follow. So far, there has been African cooperation, mostly at official state and economic sector level, but no real unity and integration has taken place yet in a manner that realises the pan-African dream of one continent, one people and one destiny.

Challenges from within and without the continent

The advancement of a pan-African agenda will depend on two cardinal realisations: that we need to reclaim, revive and reassert pan-Africanism and defeat neo-colonialism; secondly, that no society has ever made history or progress without relying on its own resources – financial, human, technological, ideational or leadership.

The evidence of a 21st century scramble for Africa suggests that the pan-African agenda is off course, if by pan-Africanism we mean the undoing of nineteenth century colonialism, imperialism and racism.

The tension between promise and real change

In the 21st century, as in previous centuries, African reality is shaped by local and domestic forces that reproduce power structures which also extend to knowledge. In other words, whereas there are signs of great potential for the regeneration and restoration of the continent, new forms of domination and exclusion exert enormous pressure in a continuous struggle between hope and despair, restoration and marginalisation.

For Rowden, development means 'the transition of economies based on primary agriculture and extractive industries to economies focused on manufacturing and value-added services'.

Necessarily, African development and the integration of the continent in the global economy should translate into progress in human development, without which regeneration and restoration cannot be achieved. For some, development means the development of productive capacity of the economy as well as social development in the form of education, health and other social infrastructure.

In recent years, there has been optimism about Africa's development prospects buoyed by the decade long commodities boom and positive developments in human development indicators such as per capita incomes.

For instance, Wolfgang Fengler argues that 'Since 2000, GDP growth rates have averaged and often exceeded 5% per year and this is not limited to a subset of –poorly governed–resource-rich states. Coastal (Senegal, Mozambique) and land-locked (Burkina Faso) countries, commodity exporters (Zambia, Nigeria) and importers (Ethiopia, Rwanda), low-income (Uganda) and middle income economies (Mauritius, Botswana) have all experienced high levels of growth'.

Fengler goes further to report that 'economic growth has translated into significant human development outcomes. Poverty rates are falling fast and key social indicators are improving even more rapidly. Between 1999 and 2012, Africa's poverty rate fell from 58% to 43%, about 1 percentage point per year. Despite war and infectious diseases, Africans are now living longer than ever before – 55 years on average, which is seven years more than a decade ago. This trend is set to continue. Ten years from now, life expectancy is expected to reach 60 years, thanks to sharp anticipated reductions in child mortality. In Kenya, child mortality has declined by 38% since 2000, which is faster than the target aimed for under the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)'.

Progress notwithstanding, development consultant Rick Rowden presents a different picture in response to the 'Africa Rising' narrative. For Rowden, development means 'the transition of economies based on primary agriculture and extractive industries to economies focused on manufacturing and value-added services'. This effectively refers to the industrialisation of Africa, something which the Africa Mining Vision (AMV) refers to very strongly.

Elsewhere advancing the same argument, Rowden argues that '[F]rom late 15th century England all the way up to the East Asian Tigers of recent renown, development has generally been taken as a synonym for "industrialization"... For example, even if an African country like Malawi achieves higher GDP growth rates

and increased trade volumes, this doesn't mean that manufacturing and services as a percent of GDP have increased over time. Malawi may have earned higher export earnings for tea, tobacco, and coffee on world markets and increased exports, but it is still largely a primary agricultural economy with little movement towards the increased manufacturing or labor-intensive job creation that is needed for Africa to "rise".

Beyond the legitimate concern about Africa's development is the need to ensure that the 21st century ends the marginalisation of the continent from the global economy. Margaret Lee makes the point more aptly in a research paper that formed part of the research project called "The New Scramble for Africa" project. Lee's conclusions are instructive: '... it has become evident that additional official development assistance will not help Africa from sliding into abyss. If they are serious, the Western powers need to (i) map out a strategy for forgiving Africa's debt; (ii) remove protectionist barriers against African exports; (iii) eliminate welfare payments to their farmers that have resulted in the destruction of African economic sectors; (v) ensure that a significant percentage of the profits arising from exploitation of Africa's natural resources are used to enhance Africa's development'.

However, growth must be accompanied by development and in the 21st century Africa cannot afford a similar 'brown' European industrialisation process of the 19th century that has been harmful to the natural environment and human life.

The foregoing arguments on the 'Africa rising narrative' naturally raise the two important questions: are the changes taking place on the continent transformative and sustainable? No doubt, a positive trend of growth is welcome. However, growth must be accompanied by development and in the 21st century Africa cannot afford a similar 'brown' European industrialisation process of the 19th century that has been harmful to the natural environment and human life.

The positive trend of an improving human development index cannot be built upon through aid. Rather, it will require that African economies be built on innovation and new foundations that accord with the realities of the 21st centuries, and are better to enable sustainable development and growth. These can only be achieved if systemic changes are effected in the economic structures of the continent, including the manner in which the African economy relates with the global economic structures.

A pan-African agenda has to contend with these and many other challenges and tense changes taking place within the political economy of the African and indeed global economy.

What of ideational and political leadership?

Whereas the trend of peace, stability, regular elections, rule of law et cetera is on the rise, the same cannot be said about ideational and visionary political leadership. For instance, the African university which is supposed to produce a critical-thinking class and a competent leadership is, in most instances, in disarray. For instance, as Mamdani argues, 'Today, the market-driven model is dominant in African universities. The consultancy culture it has nurtured has had negative consequences for postgraduate education and research. Consultants presume that research is

all about finding answers to problems defined by a client. They think of research as finding answers, not as formulating a problem. The consultancy culture is institutionalized through short courses in research methodology, courses that teach students a set of tools to gather and process quantitative information, from which to cull answers.

Today, intellectual life in universities has been reduced to bare-bones classroom activity. Extra-curricular seminars and workshops have migrated to hotels. Workshop attendance goes with transport allowances and per diem. All this is part of a larger process, the NGO-ization of the university. Academic papers have turned into corporate-style power point presentations. Academics read less and less. A chorus of buzz words have taken the place of lively debates’.

The combination of questionable leadership and the struggle for a return to a just and fair battle of ideas (the struggle for the restoration of Africa as a knowledge space), makes the pan-African agenda a worthy and yet challenging struggle to wage in the 21st century.

Both global power and knowledge production is anchored on definite political economic systems and power structures. The fact of decolonisation of Africa does not immediately translate into the end of Africa’s marginalisation in the area of knowledge production. In fact, colonial legacy points to the fact that the African space is not seen as a knowledge space and therefore most of the knowledge produced on the continent does not fit the universalising Eurocentric criteria of knowledge. The African academy therefore remains marginalised, impoverished and is regarded as the youth of the world.

We cannot rethink the West and modernity outside of rethinking the place and role of Africa, in restoring the humanity of humanity, as a whole.

In terms of leadership, the late Prime Minister of Ethiopia Meles Zenawi puts it more aptly, ‘[T]he underlying fact is that African states are systems of patronage and are closely associated with rent-seeking activities. Their external relationship is designed to generate funds that oil this network of patronage. Their trading system is designed to collect revenue to oil the system. Much of productive activity is mired in a system of irrational licenses and protection that is designed to augment the possibilities of rent collection’.

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The limitations of a statist pan-Africanism

A lot of work has gone into promoting pan-Africanism and the political unity of the continent, and this has not gone without contestation and controversy from within the continent itself. So far, the pan-African agenda for African unity, progress and restoration has been state-led.

Muchie, Habib and Padayachee argue for a shift from a statist pan-Africanism to a ‘democratisation of African integration’. They argue that ‘[T]he advantage of civil society participation is bringing integration and its potential benefits down to

grassroots. In the process there will be public education, public debate, public participation and open and transparent process that lead to accountability and legitimacy of the African project of integration’.

In the end, the pan-African project is aimed at uniting the African people, economies and states in a manner that restores Africa to its former position before the 1884/85 Berlin Conference. Therefore, there must be a simultaneous process to unite the people, the economy and the states. However emphasis must be placed on the role of the people. In the 21st century, the accelerated tempo for African unity must come from below.

Pan-African agenda in the 21st century?

The recent spate of uprisings in North Africa is quite encouraging. These uprisings are about people reclaiming their space as makers of history, demanding political and economic reform that promotes inclusivity – although neither loud nor conscious at times, these struggles also speak to African unity. However, disunity such as the experience in the Sudan recently is quite a blow to African unity.

In addition, allowing the kind of military intervention as experienced in Ivory Coast and Libya, has set pan-Africanism backwards.

Whereas there is a lot to celebrate about the achievements of Africa in the past 50 years, with the last 20 years having seen increased stability, economic growth and favourable demographic profiling, there is another parallel story that casts doubts as to the transformation and sustainability of an ‘Africa rising’.

Yes positive changes abound. To the extent that these positive changes are happening parallel to the rise of inequality and continued marginalisation of the continent in the global political economy, the possibility of unsustainability and therefore regress looms large. In this instance, economic growth must be accompanied by economic development, social justice and social inclusivity.

Africa needs to recognise opportunities and threats that exist within and outside of the continent. In order to advance, the pan-African agenda we need to understand how the 21st century world works – how it includes and exclude others, how it presents opportunities whilst simultaneously threatening to

recolonize the African continent. In order for this to happen we need, from across society, leading universities, leaders, countries and vibrant social movements that will provide critical and visionary leadership. All of this must be organised consciously into a formidable pan-African network that includes the African diaspora to reclaim pan-Africanism and Africa.

Time is running out. Everywhere the toiling masses of our people are leading brave local and national struggles that require a spiritual and intellectual connection to the pan-African agenda but one that is informed by the realities, opportunities and visions of the 21st century and beyond.

NOTES

1. The term ‘middle class’ is used loosely to mean the rising consumer class, people who have greater purchasing power to consume intermediate to high-end luxury goods. It is not applied in a classical Marxist sense. The term merely refers to the middle strata.
2. Thompson, V.B. 1969. Africa and Unity: The Evolution of Pan-Africanism. London. Longmans, Green & Co. Ltd, p3 – as quoted in Tondi, P.T. Pan-African Thought and Practice. Alternation Special Edition 2 (2005), p303.
3. Tondi, P.T. 2005. Pan-African Thought and Practice. Alternation Special Edition 2, p326.
4. Article by Wolfgang Fengler on The Economist online. Africa’s Rise: How real is the rise of Africa? Published on 12 March 2013.
5. Ibid.
6. Response article by Rick Rowden to Wolfgang Fengler on The Economist online. Africa’s Rise: How real is the rise of Africa? Published on 12 March 2013.
7. Article by Rick Rowden on The Foreign Policy Magazine online. The Myth of Africa’s Rise, with sub-title: Why the rumors of Africa’s explosive growth have been greatly exaggerated, published on 4 January 2013.
8. Lee, M. 2007. The 21st Century Scramble for Africa. Journal of Contemporary African Studies, 24:3, p324 & 325.
9. Mamdani, M. 2011. The importance of research in a university. Pambazuka News online. Issue 526. Published on 21 April 2011.
10. Zenawi, M as quoted in Mbeki, T. 2013. Africa must unite! An imperative of our time. The Thinker, May 2013, Vol. 51, p18.
11. Muchie, M, Habib, A & Padayachee, V. 2006. African integration and civil society: the case of the African Union, Transformation, No 61, p23.

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