

Brexit has no relevance to the African Union

By Anton M. Pillay

Since Brexit, several observers have suggested that this is sound evidence that the EU vision has failed along with the notion of supranational governance. Armed with nothing but Afro-pessimism, many are urging the AU to rethink its mission of a united and integrated continent under one single currency. However, Afro-pessimism is too simple a critique; and this short article will show why Brexit is of no relevance to the AU efforts at continental integration.

The most important fallacy put forward by the doomsayers is that the AU is a caricature of the EU. The EU is a culmination of some 50 years of working together to create a stronger economy and prevent Europe from going to war. While the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) was inaugurated in 1963, it was only with the demise of apartheid in 1994 that the OAU completed its mandate of eradicating the continent of colonialism. With the OAU's mandate complete, the AU was formed in 2002 to help facilitate the continent's quest for a Union Government of Africa or United States of Africa, which would have a greater resemblance to the EU. The EU project began under the mist of billions of dollars of Marshall Plan Aid and developed quickly in industrialised economies. The current 15 year old AU integration project hence is not comparable.

In its short span, the AU has overseen many achievements; to name but a few: a decrease in inter-state and intra-state conflict; the creation of its own peace-keeping forces to manage conflict; and some of the fastest

economic development in its nation states.

The AU's policy on Regional Economic Communities (RECs) is paying off with more interstate trade between African states and beneficial economic migration between citizens. Indeed the promotion of a regional agenda offers opportunities to move beyond the artificial colonial boundaries and allows for pooling of resources for development. Because of SADC, for example, one can make a call from Luanda to Maputo without it routing to Portugal first. The archaic customs and immigrations regulations which hindered the free flow of goods, services and peoples are slowly dying out with resources moving more freely across borders. This, however, remains a serious challenge.

The 2010 McKinney Global Institute (MGI) report on the performance and prospects of African economies highlights the accelerating growth rates of African economies in the first eight years of the 21st century, the almost seven fold increase in foreign direct investment over the same period, as well as the rapid rate of urbanisation. These are seen as strong indications of a take-off onto a steep growth and development trajectory. Combined with projections of various dimensions of the economic size and performance of the continent as a whole, Africa is placed alongside China and Brazil as a new emerging economic giant. These indicators are certainly a welcome sign of a potential break with the continent's poor performance trajectories in previous decades and offer the hope that a take-off onto a

sustainable development trajectory is now possible.

Mario Scerri puts forward the concept of 'imagining the future' in regard to what African integration can bring. It is well known that the colonial borders have proved disastrous and have created more harm than good. Instead of disbanding institutions, there is need to empower them. The AU's vision of the Union Government of Africa requires a single common currency. A single currency would help facilitate intra-regional trade and investment and eliminate the distortionary effects of exchange rate fluctuations. South Africa is the perfect example of how the Rand to Dollar exchange rate has wreaked havoc on the economy with its citizens bearing the brunt. US financial markets should not be responsible for Africa's economic success. A single currency will create more opportunities for macro-economic convergence in Africa's regions as well help tackle fiscal problems. A single currency would further assist in negotiating favourable trading agreements with the world, help stem the marginalisation of Africa in the globalisation process and enhance its full and beneficial integration into the global economy; from which, in comparison to other parts of the world, it has been largely been left out.

African unity represents the coming together to face the problems of neo-colonialism and Western dependency. The political and economic unity therefore is the precursor of the social and cultural unity which is the complete African experience.

Brexit speaks more on the rise of nationalism than anything else, something which has proved disastrous in Africa on many occasions. While Britain was a part of the EU, it had a loose arrangement with the Union, for example never wanting to give up its own currency for the Euro which after all is the basis of a strong union if not the whole point. The very idea or rationale of the AU attempts at continental unity is to break the mould of post-independence African politics, not strengthen it. Therefore, the AU has very little to learn from Brexit and instead should continue on its path for continental integration. ■