

9 | Last words: before Africa can unite?

In 1963, just as the Organization of African Unity was being founded by Africa's newly independent states, President Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana published his book *Africa Must Unite*. Nkrumah, the leader of the first sub-Saharan African country to gain independence from its former colonial power, called for the speedy political union of the whole continent: 'Seek ye first the political kingdom, and all else shall be added unto you.'

Nkrumah's vision did not carry the day. Though Ghana was supported during the negotiations to establish the OAU by the North African countries Algeria, Egypt, Libya and Morocco, as well as Guinea and Mali (collectively known as the 'Casablanca Group'), it was decided that colonial borders would be respected.¹ Other leaders of newly independent African states did not see the merit of giving up their hard-won powers to a continental federation, preferring the 'step by step' approach to African unity proposed by President Julius Nyerere of Tanzania (and the much larger 'Monrovia Group' of states).

In the years following 1963, African states largely concentrated on their own internal problems and on the effort to free the remaining colonies or white-minority regimes from European rule. The project to build Africa-wide political structures and an African citizenship was put on hold. Already established regional political unions collapsed; including Nkrumah's own Ghana–Mali–Guinea union, and the East African federation of Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania.

Nevertheless, the pan-African ideal kept its powerful appeal across the African continent. African leaders through the decades that followed have echoed Nkrumah's sentiments, whether or not they are keen supporters of the political project. Even former South African president Thabo Mbeki, one of the more cautious

leaders on the subject of continental political integration, chose to open and thread his speech at the symbolic moment of adoption of South Africa's post-apartheid constitution in 1996 with the words 'I am an African'. Ordinary Africans are perhaps more likely to identify with an idea of 'Africa' than Europeans with an idea of 'Europe'.

In the last decade, the debate over pan-Africanism and the idea of continental political union has acquired new urgency. The end of the cold war, the final achievement of majority rule in South Africa, and the rapidly accumulating pressures of economic globalization all played a part in the revival: all three developments created new possibilities and new needs for Africa to speak with one voice. Libyan head of state Mu'ammer al Gaddafi was the unlikely catalyst for action. Gaddafi, rebuffed by Arab states in his efforts to become a regional political leader, turned to Africa for support and used Libya's oil wealth to back the initiative that put a new continental political framework in place. In September 1999, African heads of state and government meeting in Libya under the auspices of the OAU issued the 'Sirte Declaration' calling for the establishment of an African Union, in order to 'rekindle the aspirations of our peoples for stronger unity, solidarity and cohesion in a larger community of peoples transcending cultural, ideological, ethnic, and national differences'.

Thanks to the same divisions that had existed in the 1960s, the African Union that was eventually created in 2002 to replace the OAU aspires to an architecture more similar to that of the European Union than a close political federation. Further discussions from 2006 at head-of-state level on the route 'Towards a United States of Africa' have not resulted so far in any such grandiose outcomes; though fitful progress has been made at achieving greater subregional integration, including the revival of an East African Community and strengthening of cooperation elsewhere. In February 2009, Gaddafi was himself elected to serve a one-year term as chairperson of the AU, with promises to drive the process forward.

The debates surrounding these issues have also relaunched the

discussion of a common African citizenship that had flourished decades earlier. In 2002, the year the new African Union was created, a high-level meeting adopted a consensus statement urging that 'Africa should move towards a common citizenship, through the initial steps of harmonizing citizenship, naturalization, immigration and employment laws, and through progressively removing restrictions on travel'.² In 2004 and 2005, further meetings endorsed the idea of an African passport.³ In 2007, an African diplomatic passport was actually launched, for staff and representatives of the AU structures; a small step towards the longer-term aim.⁴

These proposals are not just an esoteric exercise for those who attend the apparently endless round of international meetings that seldom seem to have results in the real world; or at least they have the potential to be much more significant. A commitment to greater African integration and recognition of a common African destiny at continental level provide an important opening for the debate about citizenship rights. If each state in Africa has different and contradictory rules for the identification of its own citizens, how can there be common rules for being a citizen of the continent? If these rules are abusive of the rights of those who should by any rational system be citizens of each country, how can a continental citizenship be built that itself is something that Africa's peoples would aspire to and which would ensure them a brighter future? If there are millions of people who live in Africa and know no other home but are not recognized as citizens by any individual state, what hope can they have from a stronger continental government?

The current moment is a critical opportunity to begin the process of addressing these problems. The debate over the creation of a 'Union Government' for Africa draws on deep roots of the pan-African ideology that fundamentally rejects distinctions of culture, language and 'tribe', as well as colonial borders. And though some strands of pan-Africanism contain a strong racist element based on skin colour, many others do not, backing instead the concept of pan-Africanism as a political and not a racial

or cultural project. But this 'grand debate' on continental unity is so far missing a serious discussion on the content of African citizenship laws today, and the need for their harmonization in line with principles of equality and non-discrimination before an African citizenship can be created. The case studies in this book show how much such a discussion is needed. With clear political leadership at continental and at national level to re-define the national community on an inclusive basis, histories of discrimination and violence can be overcome.

To solve these problems, African countries will need to move towards the international norm whereby legal citizenship is not based on ethnicity or inherited connection to the land, but rather on objective criteria that welcome as new members of the national community all those who can make a contribution to its future. The gender discrimination in the grant of citizenship that condemns many to a half-life where they can never fully participate in community or national debates must be ended. Treating people as not 'authentic' citizens means that their loyalty to the state will indeed be tested; generosity to newcomers will inspire the stronger loyalty in return.

Of course, resolution of the complex problems of exclusion and inequality will require action across the board and not only reforms of citizenship law. Côte d'Ivoire, DRC and Zimbabwe most obviously – but also many other countries – will need equitable methods to adjudicate competing claims to land and provide secure tenure for the future. Everywhere measures are essential to ensure rights to access state services and to benefit on a more equal basis from the national wealth, whatever one's race, ethnicity, gender or region of residence. Measures of affirmative action are justified to overcome inequalities created by colonial history. In all African countries a greater respect for due process and the independence of the judiciary, limits on executive power and action against grand corruption, as well as better design of electoral systems and electoral management, must contribute towards the creation of states in which all can be sure that their rights will be respected without the need to take up arms. The

education system can make its contribution to ensuring that individuals can engage with equal autonomy in both the public and private spheres.

But an effort to address citizenship-law discrimination will in the countries affected be at the centre of these efforts. African states, like other states, are made up of people thrown together by historical circumstance. A citizenship law that founds itself on a concept of ethnic or racial purity, or an essential link to the land, is not adapted to the reality of historical and contemporary migration. Those who find themselves living within a single polity on a lifetime basis need rules, fair rules, to govern their right to belong to that state. Systems that are not based on equal citizenship for all can only be disastrous. Countries that are not at ease with their existing populations will hardly be able to commit to an 'ever closer union' with neighbouring states.