

Historicizing the Reactionary Dimensions of Contemporary Pan-African Statecraft

Written by Brooks Marmon

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BROOKS MARMON, SEP 17 2023

Since the peak of Africa's anti-colonial liberation struggles in the 1960s, pan-Africanism has been adroitly leveraged by autocrats seeking to deflect challenges. At its most fundamental level, pan-African thought and action seeks to reduce the outsized influence of the West and boost the continental power of an area home to 33 of the world's 46 least developed countries. However, a spate of recent geopolitical developments demonstrates the more reactionary facets of this ideology. Although an earlier generation of political scientists, scholars, and activists during the age of decolonization were unsettled by the shortcomings of pan-Africanism, this hesitation receded in subsequent decades.

In Francophone Africa, a flurry of recent military takeovers has seen efforts to consolidate popular support by manipulating neo-colonial grievances against the West and the former colonial power, France, in particular. Some observers, such as a former African Union diplomat, have lauded the rhetoric of these military leaders as a pan-African advance, a palpable blow against neo-colonial interests. This diplomat, like many contemporary scholars and political analysts, downplays what Rita Abrahamsen dubbed "the tension filled relationship between two of pan-Africanism's main building-blocks," namely unity and sovereignty. *Worldmaking after Empire* (2019), a widely acclaimed book by Adom Getachew, is more representative of the prevailing scholarly view surrounding pan-African activity. Getachew describes the efforts of several African anti-colonial and initial post-independence leaders, several of whom presided over one-party states, as "a project of reordering the world that sought to create a domination-free and egalitarian international order."

This more charitable framing is at odds with the perspectives of a prior generation of political scientists and intellectuals. Scholars like Ali Mazrui, W. Scott Thompson, and CLR James (the latter also celebrated by Getachew) writing more contemporaneously in the 1960s and 70s, denounced the attempts of figures like Ghana's Kwame Nkrumah (a key *Worldmaking* protagonist) to form a Union of African States as a self-serving bid to amass greater power.

As African leaders turn away from the West and its perceived hypocritical stance on democracy, they remain eager to attract new international allies or consolidate relationships formed during anti-colonial struggle. This sometimes brings them closer to authoritarian governments (both on the continent and overseas) with little regard for the rights-based agendas that ostensibly animated liberation struggles. While this pursuit may sharpen select pan-African bonafides, it also undermines continental unity.

Burkina Faso's military leader, Captain Ibrahim Traoré, has, through both his youth and sartorial choices, cultivated comparisons to Thomas Sankara, an earlier Burkinabè leader and revered pan-African idol. Despite their pan-African proclamations and aspirations, both Traoré and the military leadership in neighboring Mali and Niger have become alienated from the Economic Community of West African States, the regional bloc (ECOWAS). These military coups have also resulted in suspensions from the African Union (AU), the premier continental bloc.

Similar scenarios are playing out down south, albeit to a lesser degree. Officials from the ruling parties of both South Africa and Zimbabwe voiced concerns about the conduct of Southern Africa Development Community (SADC)

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electoral observers who issued critical pronouncements about Zimbabwe's recent elections. The poll was widely seen as flawed. Local independent election observers were even arrested and prevented from independently tabulating results.

Zimbabwean state media excoriated the conduct of the Mission head, Nevers Mumba. Mumba was appointed by the president of Zambia, who defeated an incumbent in 2021 to secure power. Consequently, the mission was seen as being biased against Zimbabwe's ruling establishment. However, SADC has traditionally railed against Western sanctions on Zimbabwe that ostensibly seek to promote good governance. Solidarity among the region's remaining governing liberation movements now clash with efforts to consolidate a democratic culture.

Abrahamsen's competing impulses, unity and sovereignty, illustrate how countries like Burkina Faso, South Africa, and Zimbabwe, while seemingly doubling down on pan-African rhetoric, simultaneously come into conflict with continental or sub-regional blocs as they assert their national authority.

Much of the retrospective groundwork to valorize African independence leaders was laid by scholars in the 1980s and 90s. This was an era when both Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe, and his South African counterpart, Nelson Mandela, were lauded for the sacrifices they made in the struggle against white minority rule. While Mandela's legacy generally remains intact, Mugabe lost his veneer during his lifetime.

Zimbabwe is perhaps the example *par excellence* of the excesses enabled by the failure to diagnose reactionary pan-Africanism. Jeffrey Herbst infamously wrote of "the last stage of racial reconciliation in Zimbabwe" just a few years after government-led mass atrocities against the Ndebele in the early and mid-1980s resulted in thousands of deaths amidst a concerted push to become a one-party state. Mugabe was knighted over a decade after his administration unleashed these lethal attacks in Matabeleland, an opposition stronghold. This knighthood and other international accolades, such as a honorary degree from the University of Edinburgh, were only revoked after attacks on white economic interests proliferated when Mugabe faced a strong challenge from the opposition.

As my own research shows however, Mugabe's intolerance of dissent and political competition was evident from the beginning of his political career in the 1960s. For Mugabe and many of his peers at the forefront of the revolt against colonial rule, pan-Africanism was a means to deny the legitimacy of their competitors.

Amidst the struggle for liberation, some anti-colonial nationalists recognized the limitations of pan-Africanism, such as Dunduzu Chisiza, who was expected to become independent Malawi's first finance minister before his untimely death in a car crash. In a pamphlet first published in 1961, Chisiza declared, "pan-Africanism as a strategy for emancipation, is unquestionably effective. But as a unifying agent for regional co-operation it is far too superficial."

This lack of depth denotes the susceptibility of pan-Africanism to manipulation by autocrats. It also highlights the challenges facing continental solidarity today. While there have been advances, such as widespread consensus around the African Continental Free Trade Area, other initiatives of the African Union, such as freedom of movement, have been more contentious. Two powerhouses of the continent, Nigeria and South Africa have experienced diplomatic tensions surrounding issues of mobility. Xenophobia, the antithesis of pan-African solidarity, has flared in countries as disparate as Zambia and Cote d'Ivoire.

Global reforms that genuinely accord Africa a more proportionate share of political power will substantially mitigate against more reactionary expressions of pan-Africanism. However, as scholars and stakeholders assess geopolitical events on the continent, they should recall that political tactics concerned with the consolidation of power are a two-edged sword. As a more critical generation of scholars in the 1960s and 70s noted, Pan-Africanism is not only a virtuous tool to assert the strength of a historically marginalized continent.

Recent actions by African military leaders and entrenched ruling parties who are unable to countenance opposition on historical grounds are the latest reminders of the ideology's more self-serving dimensions. In countries like Mali, Burkina Faso, and the Central African Republic, French influence has been replaced by increased ties with Russia. In the early 2000s, Zimbabwe's deteriorating relationship with the West saw the embrace of a 'Look East' policy and

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stronger relations with autocratic regimes like Iran, China, and Belarus. These policy shifts may antagonize historical oppressors and hearten certain pan-African adherents. However, they seem unlikely to strengthen unity and sovereignty in a way that advances a less reactionary version of pan-Africanism.

About the author:

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