

Review - Integrating Africa

Written by Matthew Graham

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MATTHEW GRAHAM, DEC 13 2013

Integrating Africa: Decolonization's Legacies, Sovereignty and the African Union

By: Martin Welz

Abingdon: Routledge, 2013



Ever since Kwame Nkrumah became the president of an independent Ghana in 1957, the Pan-Africanist dream of a United States of Africa has been mooted by continental leaders. Although Nkrumah's ideas did not come to fruition, over fifty years later the dream had not faded, and by 2007, such a proposal was again being considered at the highest levels of the African Union (AU). Furthermore, in 2013, to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of its predecessor, the Organisation of African Unity (OAU), the AU announced it to be the year of 'Pan-Africanism and African Renaissance', providing an opportunity to work towards a more closely integrated continent. This decision by the AU reinforces the notion that an integrated Africa is still a pressing concern for some nations. Yet, the Pan-Africanist ideal of establishing a Union Government, with the aim of eventually creating a United States of Africa is by no means universally popular across the continent; a dream largely promoted by a minority of dominant personalities such as former Libyan leader Colonel Gaddafi. However, the elephant in the room is why would African leaders even discuss the idea of a more unified continent, when many member states are so unwilling to participate and engage

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with AU institutions (p.4)? In *Integrating Africa*, Martin Welz sets out to examine this dilemma, and delve into the reasons behind the varying levels of engagement with the AU across the continent.

In this easily accessible book, Welz seeks to understand the problems and contradictions of AU integration by analysing the organisation from the perspectives of its member states. To achieve this, Welz has selected eight case-studies from across the continent, which depending upon their stance towards the AU and their willingness to cede sovereignty more broadly, he has labelled as: 'defenders' (Zimbabwe and Swaziland), 'guardians' (Algeria and Ethiopia), 'volunteers' (Burkina Faso and South Africa) and 'enthusiasts' (Uganda and Mauritius). Not only do these choices ensure a wide geographic coverage, it means that smaller nations such as Swaziland and Mauritius which rarely get discussed in the discourse of the AU are given a platform. This is a novel approach, as far too often academic studies simply approach the AU as a monolithic entity, rather than assessing it via its component parts. On challenging questions such as continental integration, such a focus is wholly unsatisfactory and is unable to fully recognise the nuances of the AU. By reversing this academic trend, *Integrating Africa* is an important step forward in developing our understanding about how certain states approach and use the AU, providing a glimpse into their 'true' positions within the on-going integration debates.

Based on rigorous research across the continent and interwoven with a rich tapestry of interviews with experts, politicians and stakeholders, each self-contained case-study provides an in-depth assessment of that nation's relationship with and attitudes towards the AU. There are many potential factors that affect a nation's specific stance towards the AU, but Welz breaks them down into five broad and manageable themes: the historical dimension; socio-economics; the political system (often characterised by the attitudes of a leader); its foreign policy; and finally the way in which it works with the AU. Several important issues become apparent throughout the case-studies when comparing the variations across Africa. While not particularly surprising, the first, and perhaps the most significant, is the continued power of the past upon present political concerns. What Welz argues is that the historical legacies of colonialism and the decolonisation processes are important influences; depending on how self-determination and independence was achieved, clearly affects a government's willingness to cede sovereignty. For example, the current governments of Algeria, Zimbabwe and South Africa all waged protracted wars of national liberation, and their leaders are naturally more cautious at relinquishing these hard earned freedoms. The second major finding is intertwined with the first, and this is concerned with the level of democracy achieved within certain states. Therefore, more authoritarian or undemocratic systems such as Zimbabwe, Swaziland and Algeria, are far more unlikely to work towards greater continental integration. In fact Welz highlights the ways in which many leaders use the AU pragmatically and strategically for their own purposes, such as the legitimisation of their own domestic positions. However, as a new wave of democratisation has spread across the continent, and various autocratic leaders have been removed, there is hope that things might be beginning to change, and a renewed interest in closer integration may occur. Conversely, more democratic systems are regarded as being more prepared to cede varying degrees of sovereignty to the AU.

However, while these main findings help to offer some insights into the question of ceding sovereignty, they cannot explain all the distinctions in attitudes. What emerges is that some nations have no defined policy towards the AU such as Swaziland (pp.58-59), while for other nations like Algeria (p.69), South Africa (p.120) and Mauritius (p.161), it is economic rather than political/ideological interests that are of far greater importance; therefore Africa more broadly plays a diminished role in the national interest. While these factors do not necessarily explain a nation's willingness to cede sovereignty, they are important issues that help to demonstrate the way in which the AU is regarded by some states. Furthermore, Welz discovers that for many nations it is regional rather than continental groupings such as SADC and ECOWAS that are of far greater importance than the AU (pp.177-178). Indeed, when conceptualising an integrated continent, it is the gradual development of these regional groupings that will have more success in the long-term, rather than the overblown dreams of grandeur that represent the United States of Africa model. As Welz rightly asserts, it is these incremental steps towards unity and the ways in which the AU manages and steers this process that will be of fundamental importance in the future (p.183).

Although the book is premised around investigating the question of a United States of Africa and the necessary integration this entails, it would have been nice to see a wider analysis of the desirability of the Union Government proposal, despite the AU's Accra debate in 2007. Is this something that is actually desired by African states? The

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evidence would point to the contrary, and none of the case-studies seem particularly concerned by the demands for a united continent or demonstrate much willingness to cede sovereignty. Therefore, in terms of balance, the book would have benefited from an analysis of those that actually support the proposal of a united Africa. Welz does justify his selections and omissions (pp.23-26), but given that Libya under Gaddafi was the most vocal proponent of this 'dream' it is somewhat surprising this was not included – however, since the demise of his regime, the priorities of the new authorities have clearly changed. Furthermore, a more minor point, is that in terms of geographic coverage, Burkina Faso is the only representative of West Africa, which has been largely neglected in favour of other regions, with SADC nations comprising half of the case-studies.

However, *Integrating Africa* is a meticulously researched and accessible study into the AU. It serves as a useful contribution to the literature on the AU and provides a number of fascinating perspectives into some of the main issues from the perspective of its member states. Moving away from traditional academic interpretations, this book will help readers to develop a deeper understanding of the organisation and the on-going debates about its future and purpose.

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