

"From the OAU to the African Union: Retrospective and Prospective Reflections"

**Address by Dr. Salim Ahmed Salim, Secretary-General of the OAU,
At a Discussion Forum Organized by the Addis Ababa University
And the Ethiopian Political Science Association
Faculty of Business and Economics Hall, Addis Ababa University**

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**Professor Eshetu Wencheko, President of the University of Addis Ababa
and Chairman of this Forum**

Dr. Assefa Medhane, President, Ethiopian Political Science Association

Excellencies, Invited Guests

Members of the University Community

Members of the Political Science Association

Ladies and Gentlemen

I wish to thank the Ethiopian Political Science Association and the Addis Ababa University for the invitation extended to me to participate at this forum. I am particularly pleased to have the opportunity of entering the campus of the University of Addis Ababa because for some ten years I have been passing outside the venerable gates of this distinguished institution that has produced some of the best scholars - Ethiopians and other Africans - who are now serving in different parts of our Continent. It is therefore an honour for me to be here with you today.

The initiative taken by the intellectual community in Addis Ababa, under the auspices of the University and the Political Science Association, of convening a forum to deliberate on the transformation of our Continental Organization is commendable and encouraging. Indeed, it is a demonstration of a commitment that you as Ethiopian people have demonstrated consistently throughout the life of our Continental Organization and concerning the affairs of our dear Continent. It is in fora such as this where the vision for unity and solidarity of the African people can be articulated, popularized and duly sustained.

I have been asked to share my thoughts on the Transformation of the OAU into the African Union by undertaking a retrospective and prospective

reflection. I hope you do sympathize with me on my predicament, of being confronted with such a challenge, some two weeks before I complete my term of office as the Secretary General, a position that I have been privileged to hold for the past 12 years.

Ideally, such a reflection, which entails - as some would say it - going 'back to the future' requires a rigorous contemplation much after a mission has ended. At this particular juncture, I still consider myself to be virtually in the thick of things, and it may not yet be easy to detach myself and undertake a reflection of the past. My difficulty is compounded by the fact that for me personally, the struggle has been a continuous endeavour from the age of 22 when in 1964 I was appointed Ambassador of my country to Egypt and had the privilege of attending the First Ordinary Session of the Assembly of Heads of State and Government in Cairo. Since then, I have not had an opportunity to pause and look back. Nevertheless, I shall try to do my level best to fulfill my part. Later, I sincerely hope you will join me in the journey this afternoon, in which we should collectively undertake a reflection about our destiny as Africans.

I need not belabour the point that the notion of unity and solidarity for our people is not new. The drive for unity was even embedded in Africa's pre-colonial societies. Indeed, scholars, and particularly sociologists who are here, may be familiar with the complex array of arrangements and institutions that have existed in our societies since time immemorial. These were aimed at fostering closer relationships among communities and nationalities for purposes of maintaining harmony, resolving conflicts, and promoting interdependence. For example, in the area I come from, there has existed a creative and robust institution called 'Utani', which in English misleadingly translates into 'a joking relationship'. The role of this institution has been to nurture relations of fraternity and solidarity between communities as far apart in our case, as communities found along the shores of Lake Tanganyika and those of Zanzibar. The historical origins of such relations have evolved through migration, wars, trade, religion and such other social phenomena. The network evolving from such institutions link people and societies into some type of a convivial relationship.

In terms of modern history, you may also recall the movement of Pan-Africanism that started at the beginning of the 20th Century and the various initiatives taken since then to confront the challenges of the time. It was the momentum deriving from the Pan-Africanist Movement which culminated in contacts and consultations leading eventually to the creation of the Organization of African Unity in 1963 here in Addis Ababa. The quest for unity in our Continent has, therefore, been an integral and essential part of our being African.

It is to be recalled that prior to the holding of the first Summit here in Addis Ababa, at the invitation of Emperor Haile Selassie, African states were divided in different groups. There were, for example, the Casablanca Group, the Monrovia Group, and the Brazzaville Group. All these had their own perspectives on the way forward and on the approach towards unity and on how to face the challenges ahead. Furthermore, even at the formation of the OAU here in Addis Ababa, the differences of approach were manifest between those who wanted a more revolutionary process towards Continental unity and those who were more cautious and guarded in approach. Indeed, the debate on what type of Unity our Continent should aspire for continued and was also manifest at the Cairo Summit during the First Ordinary Session.

Yet, throughout these debates, one thing remained clear. No one group, nation, or individual leader - be it a Monarch, a President, or a Prime Minister, at any point in the evolution of this process, doubted the fundamental need for Africans to pursue their destiny collectively. All the different voices were motivated by a collective desire for a better future and inspired by the determination of generations of Africans to regain their dignity and self-determination.

It is in this respect, that the idea of unity, since the foundation of our Continental Organization, has represented a resolve to pursue a vision of the future. It has embodied a bond of fraternity and solidarity among all the people of our Continent. It has constituted a vehicle for articulation and action. The OAU therefore, has not been intended simply to be an institution, or merely a structure; it has actually been an incarnation of the aspirations and collective endeavours of the African people as a whole.

It is important to underscore this point because the very act of sustaining a fervent determination to pursue the path of unity, particularly after coming out from the trauma of more than a century of colonial domination and subjugation was significant in itself. We are all aware of the ravages of colonialism, particularly its tendency to divide societies, disarticulate structures of production, and obviate every possibility of establishing linkages. Not only were social groups pitted against each other, but relationships of superiority and inferiority were deliberately fostered, structures of production were detached from those of consumption, and parts of our nations or even the Continent as a whole were alienated from each other.

Yet, our leaders and our people, rose above this devastating experience and held firmly to the ideal of Continental unity; realizing that it is mainly through our oneness can the challenges ahead be surmounted. I should hasten to add in this regard, that this spirit of Continental unity was echoed not only in the high levels of leadership of our Countries, but equally important, it was demonstrated amply in deed and action among the people themselves in their daily interactions.

It is a fact that during the liberation struggle this sense of solidarity and African identity permeated the Continent. Who can deny the decades of warmth and generosity extended to the rest of Africa by the Ethiopian people? Which African felt foreign being in Dar es Salaam, Abidjan, Cairo, Algiers, Kinshasa or Lusaka? It was a pride to encounter each other, to share our common heritage and to sacrifice for the common good, notwithstanding the abject poverty that we had inherited. I personally remember the popularity of a street in Cairo, 5 Ahmed Hishmet Street, which was a meeting point for representatives of liberation movements from all over the Continent. Similarly, here in Ethiopia, many freedom fighters of that time would testify to the generosity and contribution of the Ethiopian people to the liberation struggle.

It was this collective spirit that enabled us to defeat colonial rule and the apartheid regime and to restore the freedom and independence of the people of our Continent. Today, we can look back with a sense of pride that we did not fail the gallant fighters of the battle of Adwa, or those who were led by King Tshaka of Zululand, or of the Maji Maji Uprising in Southern Tanzania, or the combatants led by Samori Toure of Guinea, or the Libyan Ahmed Mukhtar. We took over from these fallen heroes and continued the struggle until final victory. A cardinal principle driving the prosecution of that struggle was recognition that the freedom and prosperity of only a few of us is meaningless if the entire Continent was not free.

It is here worthwhile recalling the famous declaration of Ghana's first President, Kwame Nkrumah, who asserted that the freedom of Ghana would be meaningless unless the rest of Africa was free. Or how can we forget the historic and powerful statement of the first President of Algeria, Ahmed Ben Bella, when he declared here in Addis Ababa at Africa Hall during the Founding Summit that we must all prepare to die a little for the liberation of our Continent.

There are important lessons to be derived from the way in which the liberation struggle was conducted. The whole Continent was in combat mode, all the peoples were engaged in the struggle. A dynamic synergy existed within which each one of us contributed to the onslaught. In that respect, every African - irrespective of age, gender, class or belief system - was part and parcel of the contribution to the objectives of the Organization of African Unity. The decision-making organs, the General Secretariat, and even the Liberation Committee itself were only tools for operationalizing a Continental determination. During that time, the actual OAU was based in the people themselves. This is indeed an important lesson that we cannot afford to lose sight of, particularly at this critical juncture when we are embarking on the revitalization of our Continental Organization and as we move into a higher stage of establishing the African Union.

A rarely mentioned attribute of the OAU is its inherent resilience and the capacity to overcome a tendency towards atrophy. Contrary to the cynics and prophets of doom - and there are quite a few at that, - this Organization did not wither away at the end of the liberation struggle. If for anything, it acquired a new momentum in the 1990s as it embarked into a new agenda of giving meaning to political independence and the democratic dispensation. Indeed, the consensus attained and the determination demonstrated in pursuing the ideal of promoting cooperation and integration as a basis of improving the socio-economic well-being was a laudable feat.

Reorienting the Organization at the end of the liberation struggle was no mean an achievement. Just as it was the case with the hindrances that existed at the advent of Africa's independence, which the Founding Fathers were able to overcome and establish the OAU, in the last quarter of the 20th century, there were similar encumbrances.

The OAU had to overcome two countervailing factors that posed severe impediments to the reorientation of the Organization. In the first place, the end of the liberation struggle coincided with the severe economic crisis that besieged our Continent to the point of designating this period of the 1980s to being a 'lost decade' for Africa. The repercussions of this downturn were to destroy the development gains accrued during the first two decades of independence and to emasculate the operational systems and structures in our nations. Even more serious, was the manner in which the economic crisis generated tensions and instability in our societies, undermining the spirit of fraternity and self-reliance, and fostering a temptation towards excessive materialization of our societies.

Associated with this tendency was the impact of some of the negative forces arising from the far-reaching changes that were taking place globally at the beginning of the 1990s. The end of the Cold War and the break-up of the Soviet bloc had its impact on developing countries. The unfettered tendencies of globalization particularly its threat to marginalize societies such as ours that were still traumatized by the 'lost decade' posed a serious challenge to our solidarity, our identity, and the vision of our destiny.

The promulgation of the Lagos Plan of Action, and particularly the Final Act, as well as the ultimate signing of the Abuja Treaty establishing the African Economic Community was therefore a demonstration of Africa's determination and capacity to overcome all odds and to transform negative forces into a source of strength. Today we take pride in the prevalence of a powerful constellation of Regional Economic Communities in all parts of our Continent, increasingly acquiring dynamism and vibrancy, gradually putting in place the structures for realizing the aspirations of African peoples. Every OAU Member State today, belongs to one or more Regional Economic Communities. In fact,

the present challenge is not to create these institutions, rather, it is to consolidate and rationalize their operations.

At the end of the 1980s with its devastating economic crisis and the resurgence of profound changes globally, our Continent and its Organization had to face up to new challenges. There was the challenge of insecurity and instability and the imperative necessity of developing a capacity for coping with a proliferation of conflicts, most of which tended to be of an internal nature. There was also the challenge of managing the democratic transition, from an era in which the state was the dominant actor and politics remained the exclusive monopoly of a single party to a situation of pluralizing the political space and providing a role to other actors in society.

The Continent and the Organization had also to deal with the challenge of living up to ideals that our people have struggled and some have died for. These include the respect for human rights, the prevalence of the rule of law, and the prevalence of a democratic dispensation in the system of governance. Similarly, combating the HIV-AIDS pandemic, as well as coping with man-made and natural disasters constitute a new set of challenges that the Organization had to position itself in playing a catalytic role in surmounting them.

We have thus entered the new century and new millennium with our Continental Organization being intact and strong, with profound accomplishments, and even with some new ethos that are being gradually internalized and institutionalized. Issues that were previously jealously guarded as being part of the national sovereignty and considered to be taboos to be interfered with, are now parts of the corpus of collective responsibility. Such issues include those of peace, security and stability; the rule of law and human rights; as well those pertaining to democratic governance. While we cannot say that the Organization has succeeded to establish mechanisms for preventing the violations of human rights or principles of democratic governance, such practices are now collectively treated with wrath and disdain by the African people. Indeed, it has been possible even to undertake proactive measures when violations are brought to light and established.

If I seem to be concentrating only on the strengths of the OAU, it is not that I intend to engage in an exercise of self-congratulation as the Secretary General. It is simply to assert that there have been profound achievements made during the existence of the OAU. Nevertheless, the fact still remains that the Organization has had some weaknesses and its share of limitations. This includes the exuberance of decisions and resolutions that remain unimplemented. Laudable pronouncements are often made which if implemented would make a big difference to the lives of our people. However, due to a lack of political goodwill or due to inadequate capacities, we have not implemented a bulk of them.

There is, of course, the problem of resources that tends to undermine the dynamism of our organization. The present modality of resource mobilization, which essentially depends on contributions from Member States is proving to be unsustainable. Each of our Governments is confronted with a multiplicity and competing demands for the meager resources. Arrears are accumulating and payments are diminishing. This is not a healthy trend.

Similarly, in the second phase of the Organization, as it pursues the agenda for cooperation and integration, its linkage with the people particularly the civil society has weakened. Whereas in the course of the liberation struggle there was a total involvement of our people, the Continental Organization has not succeeded in galvanizing ordinary Africans and make them feel that the Organization belongs to them and that they are the natural constituency. Indeed, there is a lack of a firm congruence between the day to day living of the African people, and the actual programme of the Organization. The notion of a 'total combat mode' in the quest for economic cooperation and integration seems to be absent. There is a danger of being alienated from the people if this trend continues.

One clear demonstration of the weakness of our Organization has been the lack of success in eradicating the continuing mayhem in our societies and the inability in general, to stop the conflicts and wars that are ravaging our Continent.

I should also mention that we all stand indicted for the genocide in Rwanda where hundreds of thousands of fellow Africans were cruelly murdered by their fellow citizens. We all stood helplessly and we could not prevent it. I would like to add also that a little more than six years after the Genocide in Rwanda, I met in Freetown, early this year, an infant, a toddler called Maimuna in a camp of amputees who, at the age of 3 months, was brutally amputated of her hands with a machette. This was done by a fellow African who claims to have been fighting for a cause.

Mr.Chairman
Honourable Ministers
Excellencies
Ladies and Gentlemen

It is with these political and institutional assets and liabilities that we are embarking in transforming the OAU into the African Union. For all intents and purposes, the creation of this new institution is not simply a change of name - because if that is the case, it is more prudent to remain with the OAU, an institution that our people are familiar with and which has achieved laudable accomplishments.

The African Union is an elevated continuation of the objectives and principles of the OAU. I have had occasion to refer to it as an 'OAU-plus'. It provides an elevated framework for African unity and solidarity by consolidating the linkage with the people, by streamlining and re-dynamizing the institutional structures, and by articulating the principles and visions in the context of the ethos that we have embraced over the years and the realities of the time. In institutional terms, while the OAU had co-existed with the African Economic Community, when it is fully operationalized, the African Union shall fuse these two entities into a single Organization.

The immediate challenge facing the African Union is the same one that faced the Founding Fathers in the formation of the OAU. The real challenge is to ensure that we are all on board and to balance and build a consensus among the different constituencies. The fact remains that not all constituent members have the same view on the pace that should be taken. I have said it elsewhere that there are those who would like to maintain the status quo, and some who would like to crawl, others who want to walk, and those who prefer running. Essentially all are prepared to move, but the problem is, at what speed should the movement take? The process of agreeing on the general framework has been outstandingly rapid. The Constitutive Act is one OAU convention that has been signed and ratified at a record time of less than one year! It is in operationalizing these principles where the challenge lies.

The Constitutive Act establishing the African Union provides for a Transition Period of one year, or such period that will be determined by the Assembly of Heads of State and Government. Last July at their Lusaka Summit, our leaders decided to have a period of one year for undertaking the major transformation tasks that will allow the launching of the new institution.

In terms of organs, at its full operationalization the African Union will have a total of 17 organs and institutions, including the Assembly and the Executive Council; the Commission; Permanent Representative Committee; Financial institutions such as the Central Bank, the Monetary Fund, and the Investment Bank; the Pan-African Parliament; the Court of Justice; Specialized Technical Committees; and the Economic, Social and Cultural Council. It is definitely not feasible to establish all these bodies within the allocated one year. There has to be some prioritization so as to concentrate on those organs which are essential for the launching of the Union, and others can be established at a later stage. In this respect, one can think of a transition from the OAU into the African Union, and then a transition within the African Union.

The African Union, however, is not only the establishment of institutions and organs. There is also the challenge of reorienting and developing programmes and activities which fulfill the principles and objectives of the Organization. In the words of the Sirte Declaration which underpins the African

Union, the practical modalities in this respect, entail accelerating the implementation of the Abuja Treaty. This, constitutes the blue-print of the integration process for our Continent. Essentially, the objective of the African Union is to achieve the aspirations of the Abuja Treaty in less than the 34 years earlier provided for, while concurrently pursuing the political agenda relating to the promotion of peace, security, stability and democratic development.

Indeed, this may appear to be a tall order; and perhaps it is. However, the reality is that we have no choice but to take up this agenda. Unity is an unavoidable imperative for us in Africa, there is no other option. Just as was the case with the struggle for liberation, each one of us has to play a part.

We have come a long way with the OAU. When the Organization was formed the context was different and we were faced with a different set of challenges. Our detractors did not give the Organization a chance. Nevertheless, as we look to the past 38 years, we take pride in not only having survived with our Organization, but we have also attained important achievements.

We are now in a different era, and faced with different challenges. The present context of globalization offers opportunities, but it also engenders a number of threats for us. In such a situation, we have no other option except to forge a stronger unity and solidarity. For us to survive unity is our only weapon, that can permit us to use our rich diversity as a source of strength. After all, even those who seem to be very strong and the most powerful, such as the advanced industrial nations, do still see the need to foster cooperation and integration among themselves. None of us in Africa can claim to be strong enough to survive on their own.

To overcome the challenges of poverty, HIV-AIDS, man-made and natural disasters, as well as the threat of marginalization we need to work together as African people. Each of us has to be involved because this is not an issue to be left to Heads of State or Ministers or political leaders. Everyone should play a part. And it is in this respect that the role of students, scholars and intellectuals in general need hardly be emphasized.

I should underscore that scholars and intellectuals carry an additional responsibility in this struggle. You need to harness the knowledge of the world and bring it to the service of the people. It is you who are better positioned to utilize the information and communication technologies that exist to develop strategies and techniques that can help our societies overcome existing pitfalls and realize our vision.

I thank you all.