The Federation of Great Lakes Region

The East African Federation is again on the horizon. The timetable is out. The Federation that was much talked about over forty years ago by the nationalist leaders may just come to fruition but under very different conditions. All the peoples of East Africa must debate these new conditions. This time around we should not leave it simply to the states and politicians to unite us. Only if we unite as a people can we ensure sustained unity. And as a people we have to widen our horizons to take into account new conditions and possibilities.

I would like to underscore two new conditions. First, the original four countries Kenya, Uganda, Tanganyika and Zanzibar which were supposed to be part of the Federation in the early 1960s have contracted to three as Tanganyika and Zanzibar are now Tanzania. As we know, the Union question itself has been a subject of much discussion among us. Do we need to resolve this issue as we enter the Federation?

Secondly, the number of potential members of the Federation has expanded to five, Rwanda and Burundi have not only shown interest but want very much to be part of the process right from the beginning. This is a welcome sign. But we have to go beyond. We have to think in terms of a Federation of Great Lakes Region (FGLR). The Federation of Great Lakes Region would include the Democratic Republic of Congo. There are many very good reasons why we should think in terms of a greater federation.

The DRC shares long borders with at least four East African countries, Tanzania, Uganda, Rwanda and Burundi. It is the richest country in Africa, holding the world's biggest deposits of copper, cobalt, and cadmium. DRC has seen no peace as its riches are coveted by imperial powers. Even neighbouring countries like Uganda and Rwanda did not spare DRC. The wars in DRC invariably spill over to the neighbouring East African countries, whether this is in the form of hundreds of thousands of refugees as in Tanzania or armed conflicts as in Uganda, Burundi and Rwanda. Both peace and prosperity in this part of the world depend strategically on peace, stability and prosperity in the DRC. It is not possible to secure peace without the DRC being part of a larger political entity.

Within the FGLR, Tanzania can play a stabilizing role while at the same time helping to curb what looks like territorial ambitions on the part of Rwanda. The Great Lakes region is becoming one of the most militarized zones in Africa as Western powers (and, unfortunately, South Africa) continue to pump arms into the region. Within a larger political grouping, it is perhaps easier and more feasible to control civil wars, which have spilled into border wars between countries.

Within the FGLR, given the different sizes and resources of the countries concerned, co-operation is likely to be complementary rather than competitive. First, no single country within FGLR has the potential of becoming a political or economic hegemon, unlike, for example, if DRC were to be sucked into the Southern African orbit. Secondly, culturally we can build on the common linguistic foundation of Kiswahili as the language is widely spoken in the Great Lakes region. Thirdly, the uneven industrial development among the potential members of FGLR is not so intense as to pose a threat to a mutually advantageous development. Fourthly, the great lakes, the railways and the harbours on the eastern seaboard provide an excellent web of transport system both within the region and with the outside world. Finally, at this stage, a larger federation which includes DRC is to the mutual advantage of both the East African countries, as traditionally categorized, and the DRC.

In fact, such a project resulting in peace in this region of Africa would dramatically boost genuine Pan-Africanism and bring the dream of African Unity closer. Finally, the FGLR would be formidable enough to protect itself from the ravages of imperial exploitation while at the same time posing no expansionist or military threat to its neighbours.

Conversely, an East African Federation as now conceived with Rwanda-Burundi in and DRC out, has the potential of dragging in the relatively peaceful East African countries into DRC/Rwanda/Burundi conflicts, in the process weakening both East Africa and DRC. Truly, history has not left us much choice: we either federate and create hopes for peace and prosperity or consume ourselves in incessant fratricidal wars.

The vision of FGLR is feasible. One country that can play a great role is Tanzania, provided it has the necessary vision. Mwalimu's vision of an East African Federation has to be transformed into the vision for the Federation of Great Lakes region. But before that

can be done, Tanzania has to put its own backyard in order by addressing the question of the Union.

The Union in the Federation

There are many unresolved issues pertaining to our Union. The fact that the Union has survived for forty years should not make us complacent. As we move towards larger unity, which at this stage is bound to take the form of a loose political federation with perhaps greater economic integration, we need to address the problems of the Union.

The central premise of the union between Tanganyika and Zanzibar in 1964, and since, has been to ensure substantive autonomy for Zanzibar. In my view, the varied problems of the union (or as they are christened in Swahili 'kero za muungano') boil down to the one central issue of how power is distributed between the Zanzibar Government and the Union Government. The central issue has little to do with numbers (two or three governments) or symbols (flag and anthem for Zanzibar) or race or religion.

Simply stated, as more and more matters become union matters – whether directly or through legal manipulation – the greater the loss of Zanzibar's autonomy and it is this the Zanzibaris, understandably, resent. The question, therefore, we Tanzanians should frankly and honestly raise and discuss is, to put it bluntly: In what form shall we enter the Federation, as the two-government union that we are now, as a federation within a federation that the three-government advocates would prefer or as a single country, state and government (one-government) that some of the mainland persons in power would want to impose?

I cannot answer these questions. These are precisely the kind of issues that the peoples of Zanzibar and 'Tanganyika' have to debate freely. What we can do is to set the terms of the debate from the standpoint, and in the interest, of the people of both parts of the union. In setting the terms of the debate, certain points can be taken as given. For example, it is in nobody's interest to dissolve the union and I don't believe that the majority of the people of Tanzania would want to do so. Some form of unity between the two peoples can be taken as not only desirable but also acceptable. The option of entering the larger federation as a federal entity, that is, as a federation within a federation, it seems to me, is equivalent to saying that we enter the larger federation as separate

entities. The third option of entering the larger federation as a single entity (the one-government scenario) is even more unacceptable. This would be nothing less than the swallowing up of Zanzibar by the bigger brother.

We are left with the only option where we enter the federation as a union provided the union is modified to ensure maximum autonomy for Zanzibar, both within the Union and within the federation. Of course, the federation itself will be a horizontal distribution of powers between the Centre and the federating entities. It is in the light of the 'problems of the union' and the form that the federation will take that we have to work out the terms of our union. The point of principle, though, is to ensure autonomy for Zanzibar.

We can therefore perhaps envisage a federation comprised of federal units and an autonomous region, which is politically and constitutionally possible so long as we ensure that the arrangement preserves the autonomy of Zanzibar, on the one hand, and is arrived at as a result of maximum participation of the people in the process, on the other. The guiding principle, therefore, should be unity, autonomy, and democracy; all guided by the vision of Pan-Africanism which is people-driven, in the interest of the large majority, and above all, which maintains peace to ensure genuine and sustainable development of the peoples of the region.

Let me end as I ended the several essays preceding this. African unity as an expression of Pan-Africanism is not only a desirable vision for Africa at this stage of our development but a necessity. It is a necessity because left on our own we are likely to become, and are increasingly becoming, pawns on the geopolitical and military chessboard of imperial powers under the hegemony of the most militarized and ruthless superpower in the history of mankind.

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