Selection of Ghana to Host the AfCFTA Secretariat is a Befitting tribute to Kwame Nkrumah

By:

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Two significant moments for African economic regionalism happened in the last few weeks. First, was the signing of the AfCFTA Agreement by Africa's largest Economy, and most populous nation – Nigeria. Second, was the decision by the AU member states to seat the AfCFTA secretariat in Ghana. As a Kenyan, I must admit that I was at first conflicted when the news of selection of Ghana as the seat for the headquarters of the continental economic Free Trade Area was announced. On the one hand I mourned the loss of Kenya's bid to host the secretariat, while on the other hand I engrossed myself in deep reflection as to the significance of the choice of Ghana. Granted, in the modern day economic integration realities, many other factors, other than raw sentiment and nostalgic symbolism, influence corporate and individual decisions of organisations in determining an organisation's headquarters.

Important consideration is put on matters such as security, availability of physical amenities, accessibility; availability of reliable communication facilities and infrastructural development, including, in this digital age, the availability of reliable fast-speed internet. I am sure these must have featured in the criteria for the evaluation of bids by the relevant committee. However, symbolism and politico-legal considerations either consciously or unconsciously also play a part in influencing these decisions.

Ghana and its founding father, Kwame Nkrumah, have played a pivotal role in the Africa's revolution, integration and the evolution of Pan Africanism in general. Besides his prolific writings, which cemented his place as a foremost proponent of Pan Africanism, Nkrumah was not only a freedom fighter, but also one of the recognisable organisers of the 1945 Manchester Pan Africa congress which primarily advocated for decolonisation of the continent and the supplanting of colonialism with African socialism. Nkrumah believed in continental political integration with a common market, a single currency, an African Central Bank, a common foreign policy, a common defence system and common citizenship among others. This preposition, however, proved too advanced at the time for most of the then nascent African states that formed the now defunct OAU. A less radical approach to integration favoured by the moderates led by Tanzania's Mwalimu Julius Nyerere that advocated for an incremental step-wise cooperation carried the day. It is for these and many other reasons that I opine that the seating of the AfCFTA secretariat in Ghana is a befitting tribute to Nkrumah.

Ghana, itself, offers its own exceptional mix of impressive statistics. It was the first African country to attain independence in 1957. In 2010 it was ranked the most friendly country in the world. In 2018 it was ranked in the Global Peace Index as the 41st most peaceful country in the world and 5th in Africa. With an economy that is growing at the average rate of 6.8% per annum compared to the global average of 3.6%, Ghana indeed boasts of an impressive resume.

Nkrumah and Ghana therefore evoke feelings of afro-centric Pan African nostalgia of the 1950s and 60s. The choice of Ghana, therefore, serves as a reminder of the ever receding mirage of Pan Africanism in the modern Africa. It almost seems as if the choice of Ghana is deliberately meant to remind Africans

of the significance of integration and the African sprit of Pan Africanism, a concept similar to Ubuntu, which can only be felt but not seen.

Yet, the reality of today's Africa needs more than spiritual and emotional nourishment. Real actions in terms of actualising the AfCFTA are not going to be as easy as romanticising on Nkrumah and Ghana, or its tourist attracting pristine beaches, or the expanses of plantations of chocolate producing cocoa along the gold coast of West Africa.

While to pillars of Nkrumah's philosophy, decolonisation and single party democracy, have either been overtaken by time or find no relevance in today's Africa, his views on African socialism present an interesting perspective for Africa's current economic integration conundrum. African socialism was characterised by a system in which the individual thrived as part of a community, as opposed to individualism. The individual was seen as having obligations towards his community, and in turn the community owing the individual certain obligations: social, cultural, economic and political. African socialism as an ideology was, therefore, originally, a reflection of the African way of life which was, for most part, communal.

The problem with African socialism is the 21stcentury, in which the AfCFTA is set and seeks to operate, is threefold. Firstly, the very concept of economic integration is capitalist in its very DNA. It is built on the principle that the attraction and retention of investment capital is good for the state and its people. This concept runs contrary to Nkrumah's socialist approach to development and integration that places the community as the foundation and fulcrum for socio-economic and political advancement. Secondly, the AfCFTA seeks to promote intra-African trade. In effect, cross border and transnational capital is expected to transverse the continent, unencumbered, in search of economic opportunities. This certainly disturbs the social communal fabric and promotes capitalist-individualistic tendencies. Thirdly, the average African urban dwellers of the 21stCentury are not the audience Kwame Nkrumah and his comrades in the struggle for independence in 1950s and 60s were speaking to.

Today's urbanite, semi-rural and indeed rural, Africans are more sophisticated,

formally educated, informed persons with access to world events at their fingertips or click of a button. These young largely unemployed masses of young persons under 40 years of age forms the majority of the continent's population, as the independence generation rapidly declines. This is the "current future" of the continent. It is a generation that neither witnessed colonialism nor did it experience the exhilarating joy of independence. But, it has witnessed the good, bad and the ugly of western style democracy. It has borne the yolk of civil wars and its ravages. It has felt the pangs of starvation that comes in the aftermath of natural calamities such as hunger. It has also seen the effects, and benefits, of foreign investment, private and sovereign debt. This generation has also been witness to the political deceit that comes with broken promises and delayed execution of integration efforts by its leaders, domestically and regionally. It has also suffered totalitarian demagogues and decades of effects of democratic deficit. Yet, the young people of Africa still stubbornly remain hopeful and resilient. This is the audience the new African socialism should speak to.

It is anticipated that the majority of Africa's population will be urban dwellers by the year 2050. Of the more than 2.2 billion people added to the world population by 2050, half will be in Africa. Africans' social interactions are, and will remain largely outside their communities or even countries; This is bound to rapidly increase, if the AfCFTA is to be successful.

It is for the foregoing reasons that a new interpretation of African socialism is important to conceive; one that sees the continental as the community within which the African individual owes allegiance and from whom he expects reciprocating obligations. Not ideologically far from what Nkrumah advocated, just slightly different. The AfCFTA, as a community, must therefore provide the capitalist African individual with the social network and tools to thrive within his new community. That is the lens through which the new African socialism should be viewed, and the spirit that should elicit the new generation of Pan Africanism.

If that be the spirit of the 21st Century renaissance of the African continent, then the following matters are of grave urgency to the new age African socialism: a visa free Africa for Africans; free and affordable movement of

capital, persons, goods and services; and the right to establishment.

As Nkrumah so aptly put it then, as it is now:

We take neither East nor West: we face forward. Freedom is not something that one people can bestow on another as a gift. They claim it as their own and no one can keep it from them. We prefer self-government with danger to servitude in tranquillity.

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