

Covid-19 and the EAC REGIONAL INTEGRATION agenda: The fault lines exposed?

Integration is defined as the 'transfer of authority and legitimacy to a new supra-national set of institutions'. Since 1895, in the case of Kenya, Uganda and Zanzibar, and since 1919 in the case of Tanganyika territory, politicians and scholars have been toying with the idea of East African integration. At this time, the East African region, colonised under British control, was comprised of Tanganyika (i.e. mainland Tanzania), Kenya, Uganda, and Zanzibar (an island off the coast of Tanganyika). The building of the Uganda Railway towards the tail end of the 1890's kicked off the integration initiative. The railway project was a leap of faith for the British because the East African hinterland was at that time unexplored, and thus critics considered it a worthless exercise. In fact, some people thought the initiative was an example of colonial hubris. Later in 1971, Charles Miller was inspired to write a book titled "The Lunatic Express: An Entertainment in Imperialism" in which apart from mocking the value of building the railway, he also observed that the project was driven by colonial avarice i.e. exploitation of primary commodities found in the East African hinterland for the benefit of the colonialists.



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Nevertheless, it ought to be noted that the British colonial interest in East African integration aimed at accomplishing three major objectives: securing control of the Nile headwaters as a conduit

for protection of British position in Egypt and the Suez Canal; monitoring of pre-World War I era German imperial plans in the region; and opening up the Kenyan hinterland via rail transport to introduce lucrative large-scale farming. In 1899, Sir Harry Johnston was instructed to consider the merits of some form of union or amalgamation of the East Africa (Kenya) and Uganda protectorates.

The East African Common Market was established in 1900 characterised by a customs arrangement between Uganda and Kenya (then British East Africa) on the one hand, and Tanganyika (then German East Africa) on the other. Measures to integrate and interlink the three East African countries were undertaken including the introduction of the common currency (the East African Shilling), the Joint Income Tax Board and Economic Council. In the same period over forty different East African institutions in research, social services, education/training, and defense among others were established or strengthened. Also several commissions were appointed to explore the possibilities of establishing the East African Federation. Some commentators have called the period between 1900 and 1960 as the 'golden age' of the East African integration.

The rancorous debate on political federation that emerged in early 1960s when the three East African countries were preparing for independence, posed the first serious challenge to the integration of the region. Whilst Mwalimu Nyerere was in favour of delaying Tanganyika's independence so that all the three East African countries would achieve independence at the same time as a federation, his plan was scuttled by the political

elites in Uganda and Kenya who argued that the three countries should receive their independence separately so that the new rulers would enjoy the fruits of sovereignty. As it happened, the latter argument prevailed. Even the establishment of the East African Common Services Organization (EASCO) which centralized the administration of East Africa's customs, excise and revenue authorities, currency, land, sea and air transport, telecommunications; and education did not persuade the political elites to establish the federation.

On 1 December 1967, the Treaty of East Africa Community was signed thus establishing the East African Community (EAC). The Treaty was anchored on three pillars: harmonization of economic policy, common institutions and a common market. This EAC has been hailed as the 'most successful model of integration on the globe'. Nevertheless, tragedy struck in 1977 when the organization collapsed amidst recriminations among the members. The reasons for its collapse are varied but include the following: the economic war waged by Idi Amin

resulting into a divergence of currencies; the worsening relations between Uganda and Tanzania due to the latter's giving political asylum to Milton Obote; the worsening relations between Uganda and Kenya following Israel raid on Entebbe in 1976; the disparity between

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the three currencies of partner states; and the divergences in the economic policies of the partner states. The EAC was officially liquidated in 1984 with the sharing of its assets and liabilities by the member states. Nevertheless, the liquidation agreement provided for the possibility of the members reviving cooperation in future.

Between 1991 and 1999, the countries of Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania reached several agreements on reviving the EAC, and in 1999 the Treaty on EAC Cooperation was adopted by the three partner states. Later in the year 2000, the Treaty was ratified and thus the new EAC started

operating. Burundi and Rwanda were admitted as members in 2007, and South Sudan in 2016.

Cracks start appearing

The Treaty of EAC (1999) (as amended) provides that the ultimate aim of the EAC is to establish a political federation. In 2005 and 2010 respectively, a customs union and a common market were introduced. The debate on the establishment of the political federation was kicked off by President Museveni in the late 1990s. In one of his presentations in 1998, Museveni had argued that the region should deepen its integration into a political federation. Suspicion has been swirling around the intentions of Museveni's

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campaign for the East African political federation. To some, his real intention is to become the president of East Africa. When he first made his pitch for the political federation, the Ugandan army was engaged in fighting in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). One Ugandan scholar observed that Museveni was behaving as the new Bismark of the Great Lakes region in reference to the conservative German statesman who masterminded the unification of Germany in the 1870s. Suspicions about Museveni's intentions were further raised when in 2007 he undertook a road trip to Kenya and Tanzania where he awarded medals to then Vice President of Kenya Moody Awori, and the first President of Tanzania, the late Mwalimu Julius Nyerere. Also, Museveni is said to have developed a 'vision', which includes the expediting of the East African political federation and industrialization of the region, before he retires. Further, Museveni has claimed that he is the only individual with a 'vision' for Uganda and the region. In the end, the debate on the political federation and the role that President Museveni has played in it, has slowed down the integration of the region.

In 2005, the 1995 Uganda constitution was amended thus removing the provision on the number of terms a president can serve. The amendment paved the way for President Museveni to stand in the 2006 election and beyond. However, the amendment did not go down well in some partner states. At the time when the debate on the amendment was raging in Uganda, the issue also came on the floor of Tanzania's parliament for debate. The Moshi Urban Member of Parliament (MP) Philemon Ndesamburo,



Locals walk along the train tracks in Namuwongo. The Uganda railway snakes its way through many parts of the city . (PHOTO BY SALLY HAYDEN/GETTY IMAGES)

argued that Tanzania should withdraw from the EAC to protect

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its credibility. He also argued that 'Tanzania should not cooperate with an undemocratic country that wants to have a president for life'. Finally he was of the view that Tanzania is a democratic country and should protect this honor at all costs even if it means quitting the EAC. No wonder, when consultations were held in Tanzania on fast tracking the East African political federation, only 24% of the respondents were in favor.

More recently, three factors have emerged to dampen the East African integration project namely: internal political challenges; bad blood between partner states; and



difficulties in the implementation of economic integration arrangements. A situation analysis of the region indicates that Burundi is yet to stabilize following the political turmoil that started in 2015 when the late President Pierre Nkurunziza decided to run for a third term as President. South Sudan has been in a state of civil war since fighting broke out in the country in December 2013 between supporters of President Salva Kiir and Vice President Riek Machar. More than 400,000 persons have died. In Tanzania, President John Pombe Magufuli has been accused of stifling internal political dissent and freedom of expression. In

Uganda and Rwanda, the current governments have narrowed the democratic space by the occasional arrests and harassment of the members of the Opposition. From this situation analysis, the East African integration project is failing.

Uganda-Rwanda relations took a turn for the worst in 2018. Kigali leveled several accusations against Uganda including: Ugandan security agencies targeting for deportation Rwandans living in Uganda, and Rwandan rebel outfit called Rwanda National Congress (RNC) led by renegade General Kayumba Nyamwasa recruiting in Uganda with the aim

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of destabilizing Rwanda. Uganda in turn has accused Rwanda of meddling in its internal affairs including infiltrating its security. Both countries have denied accusations levelled against them. A summit meeting in March 2018 between Presidents Museveni and Kagame seem not to have resolved the issues. The border between the two countries remains closed.

Kenya and Tanzania fell out over the infrastructure projects in which the former lost out when Uganda decided to partner with the latter in the construction of the oil pipeline. Initially, Kenya had thought the pipeline from Uganda oilfields in the Albert graben area would end at Lamu; and Kenya and Rwanda signed the Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) with the European Union (EU) while Uganda and Tanzania are still holding out citing national interest. Lastly, statutorily, the EAC integration process starts as an economic arrangement and progresses ultimately into a political federation. As already observed, a customs union and a common market were established in 2005 and 2010, respectively. However, operationally both arrangements have experienced challenges. For example, the partner states have failed to harmonize joint collection of taxes. Whilst Kenya

and Uganda have imposed a 35% external tariff on imported steel products, Tanzania has not. This means that cheaper steel products are entering the Tanzania market, which can easily slip into the other partner states countries thus making the full implementation of the customs union difficult. Secondly, the free movement of labor under the common market has been met with challenges. For example, some partner states have put in place stringent measures- and fees- that make it difficult for the free movement of both skilled and unskilled labour. Other East Africans getting work permits in Kenya and Tanzania in particular, has been problematic.

Enter Covid19 pandemic

It is against the above background that the Covid19 pandemic has found the region. From the outset, it must be observed that the Covid19 pandemic has further exposed the weak underbelly of the East African integration. Whilst the regional leaders and their Ministers of Health held virtual meetings to discuss the pandemic and how the EAC can respond, coordination of the regional efforts against the disease has been lacking. Article 118 of the EAC Treaty states that partner states shall cooperate in health matters including 'taking joint action towards ... the control [of] pandemics ... that might endanger the health and welfare of the residents of the Partner States ...'. In conformity with this provision, the EAC Secretariat formulated an 'East African Community Covid19 Response Plan' in April 2020. The plan was designed to support and coordinate the regional response to the pandemic. Specifically, the plan aimed at the following including: ensuring a joint and well-coordinated mechanism to fight Covid19 in the region; facilitating

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the movement of goods and services in the region; minimizing the number of people who become infected or sick with Covid19; and minimizing morbidity and mortality from the Covid19 pandemic in the region. However, other than following this plan, the individual East African countries have adopted national strategies (including praying) to combat the pandemic. In Uganda, I have not heard any public official (including the President in his numerous statements on Covid19) referring to the regional plan! Whist partner states adopted various measures to combat the pandemic including total lockdowns (Uganda and Rwanda), partial lock downs (Kenya and South Sudan), Burundi and Tanzania never took that route. In fact, life continued as normal in Tanzania while Burundi held general elections. The last known official Covid19 statistics in Tanzania were issued on 29 April 2020. In early June 2020, President Magufuli declared Tanzania 'Covid19 free' and thanked God for eliminating the disease! Meanwhile, the other partner states have seen an upsurge of the positive Covid19 cases.

Secondly, Article 104 of the EAC Treaty provides for the free movement of persons, labour, services and right of establishment

and residence. This article has been buttressed by Article 7 of the common market protocol which spells out the details of these rights. In fact, conceptually these rights must exist in a common market. However, the Covid19 pandemic has exposed the hollowness of the East African common market. Due to the fear of the spread of the Corona virus, the partner states have tightened control of their borders. For example, with regard to the free movement of services, Tanzania and Kenya banned each other's airlines from operating in their territory although the issue seems to have now been resolved. Nevertheless, the fact that both countries contemplated this move does not bode well for regional integration. Of course, the continued closure of the Uganda-Rwanda border that I have mentioned above flies in the face of the common market.

In conclusion, even before the Covid19 pandemic struck the region, the EAC was struggling with a number of challenges. What the pandemic has done is to further expose the underlying weaknesses in the integration project. Specifically with regard to Covid19, instead of implementing the regional response to the pandemic, each partner state has individually adopted measures that it thinks can prevent the spread of the disease. This is in total disregard with the provisions of the EAC Treaty and the supporting statutory instruments. In the end, the failure of the EAC partner states to coordinate their anti-Covid19 responses has further confirmed the long held view among sections of the EAC population that East African integration is a hollow project.

Phillip Kasija Apuuli is Associate Professor Department of Political Science and Public Administration, Makerere University