

In quest for an East African utopia

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THINKING CRITICALLY

Arusha is a great emerging city that acted as the maternity ward in which Tanzanians gave birth to a vision of what kind of country, region and continent all would want to build.

The Arusha Declaration, adopted in 1967 by the then ruling party on Mainland Tanzania, Tanu, sketched out the utopia that all Tanzanians dreamed of building. Forty-five years later, last Wednesday, Arusha hosted a meeting by a pioneering group of East Africans who proceeded to launch a think tank-cum-advocacy forum whose goal is to promote the acceleration of the process of East African Community integration.

Fifteen East Africans hailing from Rwanda, Burundi, Uganda, Kenya and Tanzania, joined by five Germans working for a German Social Democratic Party non-governmental organisation called the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, met last Wednesday and Thursday in Arusha at the Kibo Palace Hotel, and, together launched a unique think tank-cum-advocacy forum that they agreed to call Vision East Africa Forum.

The significance of this seemingly innocuous event can be gauged from the fact that the launch was witnessed on Thursday by the Secretary General of the East African Community, Dr Richard Sezibera, and, Tanzania's Minister for East African Cooperation and the immediate former Speaker of Tanzania's Parliament, Mr Samuel Sitta.

The pioneering group of East African activists who met and launched the Forum share the vision of wishing to see, in their life-time, the utopia of a united, peaceful and prosperous Democratic Federal Republic of East Africa coming to pass.

They were critical and independent thinkers who were activists of the noble cause of accelerating East African Community regional integration. Some of the participants of the historic Arusha meeting were drawn from, though not necessarily representing, influential civil society organisations. On the Tanzanian side, for example, the civil society concerned included the Tanganyika Law Society, the Legal and Human Rights Centre, and Agenda Participation 2000. Other participants were drawn from the academia, such as Makerere University in Uganda and the University of Dar es Salaam in Tanzania.

The launch of this new initiative of a think tank-cum-advocacy forum was preceded by intense debate on the merits of forming such a forum. There already exists a number of effective and influential regional civil society organisations, such as the East African Law Society, the East African Business Council, and the East African Trade Union Council. This is not to mention the all-powerful East African Civil Society Organisations Forum.

Participants agreed with the proposition that there was a niche that the new forum could fill, which was that it would be a forum bringing together independent critical thinkers who would dare to grapple with the vision aspects of the various emerging EAC integration agenda. The new forum would adopt a lean organisational structure and keep its East African members focused not on preparing fund raising write-ups but on organising a few but influential activities, such as commissioning studies and organising seminars and workshops likely to influence the on-going processes of regional integration.

In launching the new Forum, the participants of the historic Arusha meeting were guided by a critical appraisal of the historical origins of the EAC. They all bought into the argument that all previous attempts at promoting regional integration in East Africa had suffered setbacks due largely to the fact that there were serious democratic deficits that characterised the governance outlook of the individual cooperating member states as well as the governance structures of the past and current EAC integration projects.

The historic Arusha meeting adopted a communiqué that has as its preamble a solemn reaffirmation of a commitment to work towards full implementation of the East African integration project as enshrined in the 1999 Treaty of East African Cooperation.

The communiqué also recognised the need for evidence-based decision making to inform the East Africa integration

process. The participants thus agreed to establish Vision East Africa Forum as a think tank cum advocacy platform whose aim was the generation and dissemination of evidence and informed opinion whose wider sharing would presumably influence, at least, the pace of the implementation of the various integration phases as par the 1999 EA Treaty. In the communiqué, the members of the Forum state the set of values and principles to which its members subscribe.

These include “the attainment of the East African federation founded on the fundamental democratic principles, social justice, equality and respect for people’s dignity, rights and freedoms” as well as “the timely attainment of the integration milestones as enshrined in the Treaty for the Establishment of the East African Community and accompanying protocols.”

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