Coalitions of the willing: JPM scuttles Kenya-Uganda alliance, EAC in ICU

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BY MIRIAM MUSA

HISTORY has a tendency to repeat itself, often in 17-year or 21-year cycles, algorithms that were not discovered by Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel or Karl Marx as they would force them to admit the role of the spirit in history, not just reason.

That is what is happening in East Africa, that 21 years after President Benjamin Mkapa laid the foundations for revival of the East African Community by visiting Kenya and Uganda early in his presidency, his favored protégé President John Magufuli is gradually laying to rest the 'dragon' of East African integration, and its intention of federation, already rejected in 2007, first cycle in Mkapa institution building drive.

From that moment onwards, followed by the report of the Wangwe Commission that Tansanians overwhelmingly rejected the idea of East African Federation being quickened, Tanzania has more or less eroded its commitment to integration as such except for the East African Customs Union.

Ten years later there is a repeat of the 1996 visits to Kenya and Uganda in the early period of the third phase presidency, as East African sensitivity moves from donor-driven integration to a locally driven quest for industrialization.

Each disposition has a distinct bearing instead of liberalization in a generalized manner, elimination of 90 per cent of customs duties on goods from the European Union, Kenya and Rwanda trust now (over)come own signatures.

It was already public knowledge that the two had signed and ratified the EU- EAC protocol for EPA, as a way of impressing upon Uganda to sign the unique agreement that has been a member of the old coalition of the willing, bent on an EPA-friendly liberalized framework of EAC integration.

Now an inward orientation to industrialization is taking over the hearts and minds of the EAC bloc over 90 per cent of customs duties on goods from the European Union, Kenya and Rwanda trust now (over)come own signatures.

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When President Magufuli visited Kenya, the EPA agenda remained high in Kenya spirits, and at the end of the visit, Foreign Ministry spokesmen insisted that the EPA plan was still on the table, that they would continue to make a case to Tanzania to come on board.

With Uganda signalling that it is no longer likely to sign, there is little hope remaining for EPA, and in the new orientation of East African integration on the basis of localized industrialization, even the customs union has some perks attached to it.

Kenya's President Uhuru Kenyatta said in an earlier 2015 meeting: 'It is the latter aspect which brought it closer to Kenya, in like manner as Rwanda's desire to modernize its economy so as to outlaw violent endemic, genocidal soul.

A core premise of EPA was that in giving full racks of trade and economic x-viability to European companies as if they were local firms, state institutions would thus be tuned to Commonwealth standards of export, which can't be met by local entities like an East African Court of Justice.

Kenya was a colony and therefore essentially close to white settlers and sensitive in its protectionism, like liberalisation, integral.

This situation reminds one of the validity of the French sarcastic expression, 'by more a change, the more it remains the same;' that East Africa has fundamentally remained the same since independence, and that these roots have become DNA material for nationalism, policy set up.

Burundi reached under vexing circumstances - giving an olive branch to President Pierre Nkurunziza to seek another term in office - was rightful and in due order. It sent a cry of dismay across the zone, reminding all and sundry of the lessons of All Magufuli, without imperialism, Africa can't democratize.

The current or new consensuses in East Africa, when Rwanda is likely to join this new coalition and the willing - to focus on localized industrialisation, ditch EPA and diminish concerns for Westerners standards of democracy - is yet to be seen in terms of its productively and solving deeply embossed social crises in each of EAC member states. One thing though is assured inward looking industrialisation is akin to an exercise in futility as global conditions are more hostile than ever, the case earlier, due to lower capacity of capital formation locally.

Taxes will be driven to higher levels, quality of goods and their abundance far less assured (relatively diminished purchasing power), and less sensitive, speculatively or overly authoritarian regime characteristics.

There will be countering trends all the same, for instance in the tenure of the new US presidency, combining an America First aloofness liked by Zambabwean centenarian leader Robert Mugabe and a more violent intimidation for deviant or rogue state behaviour, warning early the two Kenyan claimants to the presidency last this year to rein in their guns or else.

The world might not be altogether safe for an liberal approach, policy in EAC. With EAC summit twice postponed, it is bilateral accords, not EAC that matters - and thus acords are being revised to eliminate the common market root and stem.