

# OPINION

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## A summit in a time of extreme crisis: Will the EAC hold?

The heads of the six East African Community member states will confront tough issues when they meet in Kampala, Uganda, on May 10 for their annual summit. The summit will provide another opportunity for the presidents to assess progress that the countries are making towards full integration and also address the emerging threats to regional security, stability and development.

They will try to narrow their differences on the future of the regional economic bloc, which brings together over 170 million people with a combined national output of \$157 billion in 2015. As Uganda's President Yoweri Museveni assumes the leadership of the EAC from Tanzania's President John Magufuli, the leaders will have less to celebrate as cracks widen on their binding commitment to the spirit and future of the EAC — some may indeed consider a Brexit type withdrawal.

Tension within the political leadership of the community is apparent, particularly between Kenya and Tanzania — which have a long history of suspicions over shared benefits, one that led to the collapse of the first EAC in 1977. Presidents Museveni, Uhuru Kenyatta of Kenya and Paul Kagame of Rwanda have demonstrated strong support for economic empowerment of the EAC countries and their people by

deepening regional integration and expanding intra-regional trade. The three are often referred to as the "Coalition of the Willing" but Magufuli has openly challenged the EAC principles.

His administration, for instance, has tightened restrictions on Kenyans being employed or investing in Tanzania, effectively stifling the implementation of the EAC's Common Market Protocol, which was signed in July 2010 to facilitate free movement of goods, labour, services and capital to stimulate trade and investment.

Burundi and South Sudan are also giving the EAC leaders headaches, even as they deal with their own domestic problems (like this year's election in Kenya). The two countries are engulfed by protracted domestic political crises that have taken a toll on human life and their ability to effectively participate in EAC affairs.

South Sudan, which was admitted to the EAC membership only in April last year, is in particular proving to be a volatile and unreliable trade and investment partner. The situation in Burundi and South Sudan has left thousands of people dead, injured and displaced, and also dampened business opportunities for private sector investors. The Burundi crisis has persisted since April 2015 when President Pierre Nkurunziza was endorsed for a third term in office.

In South Sudan, hostilities between President Salvar Kiir and his former

deputy, Dr Riek Machar, have caused great human suffering and the situation is degenerating into civil war.

The leaders also have to grapple with the devastating impact of the prolonged Horn of Africa drought that has caused months of suffering to millions of people, mainly in Kenya, South Sudan and neighbouring Somalia (which wishes to join the EAC but is unable to meet the eligibility criteria). The drought, described as the worst in the past half century, has aggravated human conflicts and instability of the region. The United Nations has declared famine in South Sudan, where 100,000 are reported to be starving and another one million are reported to be on the verge of starvation.

The dimensions of the drought and conflict, including persecution of innocent women and children by both government and opposition agents, and killing of humanitarian aid workers in their line of duty, are particularly disturbing and it is incumbent upon the leaders to take stern action to stop the disaster.

Drought has also extensively affected Kenya and shaved at least two percentage points off this year's projected economic growth. Over three million Kenyans, mostly in the arid and semi-arid areas of northern, eastern and Coastal regions of Kenya are in dire need of food and basic needs including water, nutrition supple-

ments and medicine.

The long, dry spell has escalated deadly conflicts between the pastoralist communities and between them and owners of neighbouring ranches.

The EAC leaders have to worry about the impact of these crises on the economic, social and political stability of the region. They have a tall order to enforce the implementation of the protocols, which has been progressing at a particularly slow pace. At the end of last year's summit in Arusha, the heads of state noted the lag in implementation of policy issues of strategic importance to the EAC. These included council decisions and directives that were outstanding for many years, delays in ratification of protocols and failure by member states to ratify Bills enacted by EALA.

The leaders also need to take decisive measures to curb the political excesses that have dampened economic and social prospects for a region that was rated as the second fastest growing in the world — that was before Burundi and South Sudan exploded and drought set in. Mitigating the crises and helping the affected people to recover and restore their livelihoods is critical to the survival of the EAC.

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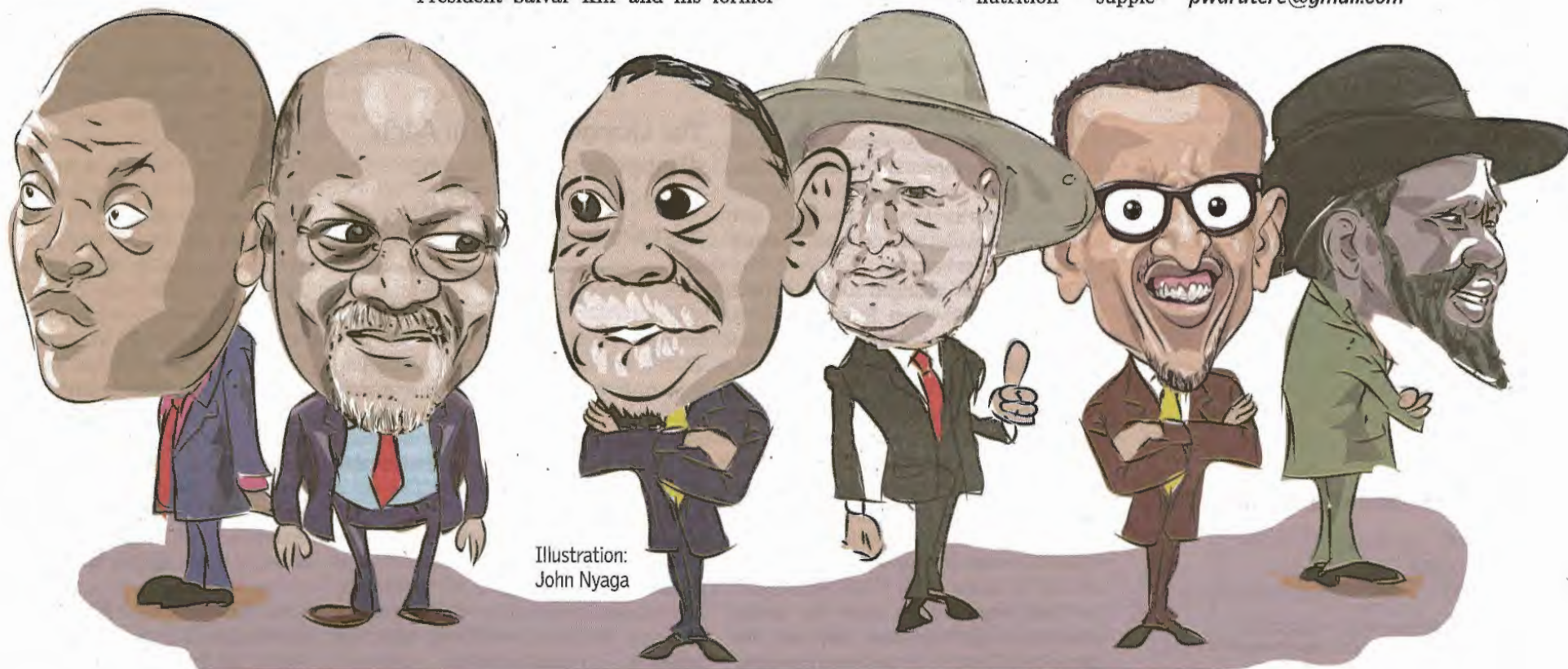


Illustration: John Nyaga