

EAST AFRICAN COMMUNITY - the third Round

A People, Market or State-driven Regionalisation project?

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A Conceptual Clarification

A formal interest in the unfolding events in the realm of international politics brings to the immediate fore two overlapping if not mutually inclusive tendencies: on the one hand, there is an increasing drive towards a robust revitalisation and a steady proliferation of regional integration efforts¹; and on the other, and particularly within the historical framework of post-Cold War era, the erratic and, sometimes, violent fracturing of national entities into irredentist sub-national claims, variably shaped by the potential for internecine conflicts. Whichever of these historical trends captures the real spirit of the time remains a moot question. It is mute because the rip-tide of globalization-fragmentation of national entities increasingly seems to go hand in hand. It is, however, necessary to observe that the two tendencies are not necessarily mutually exclusive. In fact, in one way or another, they enjoy mutual interpenetration, particularly in a sense that betrays strategic overlap and mutual embeddedness. To be sure, they all serve the social forces, the strategic interests of which either conflate or repel each other as these inform the historical character and logic of neo-liberal globalization.

The grudging, though steady, return of and compulsion towards regionalistic thinking among the political elite in the Eastern Africa region is undoubtedly one very important trend in contemporary international relation. On a worldwide scale/level it rides on the wave often and increasingly being referred to as the *new regionalism*². This wave is mainly, if not exclusively, characterized by an ever-increasing:

- geographic scope,
- demographic diversity,
- historical fluidity and
- a complex mixture and variety of driving forces and actors in the re-integration project.

We need to understand this process as a critical response to and a possible principle of order, in a world precariously globalizing under the impetus of a mono-hegemonic sway of neo-liberalism. This is now changing. And the Obama presidency may usher in a new era of multilateralism and multi-polarity which might introduce a brand new element in the process, character and social content of regional integration.

¹ Regionalisation in a Globalising World, a comparative perspective on Forms, actors and Preocesses, edited by Michael Schulz, Fredrik Doderbaum and Joakim Ojendal.London,2001

² Ibid,2001

Appreciating the historical import of the new forms of regionalism in general and East African re-integration in particular, requires that we take a fresh but decisive look beyond simple state-centric notions of regional integration and instead strive to bring other non-state actors into a more innovative focus and analysis; an analysis that should inform a deeper appreciation of the significance of the role that non-state actors should play in giving the historic drive towards regionalisation a truly local rationale and historical impetus. We have in mind a wide range of heterogeneous linkages and interactions among commercial and sub-national actors. Their individual or combined agenda for regional compacts may not always sit well with the mundane aspirations of the popular masses of the geographic region in question. To be sure, it all depends on where we feel comfortable to place the milestone. Our point of departure, however, is that the complexity and over-determination of the processes of contemporary regionalization calls for relearning of old lessons, reassessment of analytical perspectives, and re-invention of political-economic players and an ever-changing balance of social/historical forces.

The East African regionalisation experience is taking shape and, at the same time, experiencing all manner of hiccups within a historical context that is extremely complex: the cumulative crisis of capitalism characterized by the creeping in of multipolarity in international relations as a welcome sequel to the Bush-era militaristic uni-polarisation of world politics. The process is accompanied by the decline of US hegemony and the associated discrediting of the Washington consensus. The accompanying grudging retreat of the market forces is more than likely to provide an occasion for regional authoritarian states moving into the vacuum; occasioning the resurgence of state interventionism which is more than likely to monopolize and re-bureaucratize the regional integration agenda and process. This would be unfortunate. But the signals are there for many of us to see. Should this materialize, it would amount to the irony equivalent to *giving Dracula the keys to the bloodbank of our popular sovereignty.*

Recent intergovernmental experience does not provide us with any hope for a bottom-up integration process. There are no good and appreciable examples of how to construct a regionalisation agenda from a popular foundation. If anything, the impetus to a regionalization process that cannot produce a truly people-driven regionalization agenda but instead a deliberate up-scaling of tribal fragmentations – at the national level - that keeps some of our leaders in the region in power. Ordinary people in the East African region, despite colonial effort to create an extractive market in the region did not exhibit the kind of intra-regional hostility characterizing the present-day top-down regionalization efforts that make Misingo and Vanga interstate conflicts deny us any hope of ever becoming a strong and proud regional compact. We need less of such incidences if we are to look forward to a successful regionalization.

A False Dichotomy

The contemporary wave of regionalistic tendencies in international relations need no longer be understood as distinct and peremptory alternatives to the national projects with their patriotic/nationalistic overtones. To be sure, it is better explained as an instrument

supplementing, enhancing or protecting the role of the nation state and the attendant governmental capacity in a world of unequal interdependence rather than supplanting or negating the yet-to-be-exhausted spirit of national sovereignty and the attendant competing patriotic claims on it.

The conceptual toolbox for understanding regionalism or regionalization is adorned with a wide range of notions and analytical instruments; each one capturing the different nuances of the process and thereby raising some of the most nagging questions such like: as nation states, in their *proto-typic* characterisation, continue to experience a strategic deficit in the capacity to effectively engage with the challenges of the ***national question*** of national democratic construction are they, at the same time, being called upon to "pool sovereignty" or are they being required to expand their jurisdictional limits in order to accommodate and possibly neutralise the adverse effects neo-liberal character of globalisation? Are we merely being called upon to upscale the strategic implications of the unfinished agenda of the national question at the present national level discourse or are we being driven by the lure of a fad the historical implications of which we still have to fathom! Whatever the case might be, it is important to ask: which social forces are driving either of the tendencies? Is regionalism supplanting, supplementing or substituting multilateralism at the global level?

Answers to the above questions, exhaustive as they might seek to be, will still beg for more.

As a result one may proceed to ask: on what levels or for what reasons are regionalistic impulses stimulated. Is it:

- ◆ At intrastate or extra-state levels?
- ◆ At national, sub-national or at international levels?
- ◆ As response to external challenges or driven by domestic demands.
- ◆ In pursuit of Regionalism or as an act of regionalization?
- ◆ For regional coherence or regional identity?
- ◆ For purposes of International cooperation or in pursuit of regional integration?
- ◆ the Instruments of state strategy or driven by market forces or
- ◆ Re-drawing of tribal boundaries for larger conflation of ethnic hegemonic projects by regional leaders who have exhausted ethnic-hegemonic practices at the national levels?

It is crucial, at this stage, to distinguish processes underlying regional initiatives from those associated with and informing the act of regionalization. The distinction, though ambiguously tenuous and uncertain in its descriptive capacity, is important in several ways; the most important one being that of explicating the intriguing and complex dynamics of contemporary variety of regional groups and the political-economic terrain of the geographical spaces they occupy. Regionalism, for purposes of this presentation, is a state-driven project tendentiously designed to reorganise a particular regional space a long agreed-upon economic and political interests. It is mainly driven by the

configuration and balance of forces in the individual nation states. In a more specific sense, it refers to a body of values and objectives that are aimed at initiating, sustaining or modifying the commonwealth of a people occupying a particular regional space.³ By nature, it embodies the urge by any set of actors to reorganise their political-economic lives around the geopolitical demands of a given regional space. It's a product of instrumental state policies geared towards a strategic enlargement of national sovereignty in favour of broader and collective interests of the collaborating nation states and in the image of the ruling interests. Regionalization on the other hand implies the vicarious act of convergence and integration of non-state interests in the areas of culture, market and cross-border civic /interactions into the regional project. Further it stands for a broader concentration and release of national and sub-national energies around regional political economic interests, ranging from environmental conservation, and manpower development to trade.

In order to avoid the uncritical use of rigid theoretical postulates geared towards explaining the logic and historical dynamics behind the steady growth and expansion of regional organisations, it is necessary to maintain some measure of practical open-mindedness. This will facilitate methodological accommodation of the state-society dynamics necessary for explaining new forms of regionalizations; particularly those that provide the much needed platform for constructive engagement with forces of undemocratic globalization sited in WTO, DAVOS, G8, etc. This, it is always hoped, will help stem the tide of marginalization of any given region and its political-economic institutions and at the same time undermine the centre-periphery structures located within the framework of the unevenly globalizing world.

The East African Variant: *history, actors and trajectory*

East Africa as a region is characterised by the following features:

- a) Historical and natural factors endow it with a high level of integration in several areas and in a pattern decisively influenced by the colonial interests of western capitalist expansion.
- b) Initially and particularly in the pre-colonial era the region was relatively symmetrical in economic terms. Colonialism, neo-colonialism and now neo-liberalism have, as was to be expected, subjected the region to the usual unequal economic underdevelopment - concentrating powerful economic institutions and production and distribution activities in such sectors as agriculture, manufacturing, trade, transport and communication in national economies enjoying the most favourable conditions for extractive-capitalist exploitation.

³ For a more informed discussion on the topic, see Marianne H. Marchand: *North American Regionalisms and Regionalisation in a Globalizing World*, London 2001

- c) The region is rich in cross-border cultural/ethnic commonalities that pre-dispose it towards a natural gravitation towards closer integration of the most vital spheres of life.
- d) The use and exploitation of Lake Victoria promises potential benefits of cooperation among the riparian regional communities but also portends conflicts around the international use of the attendant resources.

The East African Community *phase I* was a colonial project. The colonial history of the Eastern African states is rather heterogeneous. Whereas it was constructed on a relatively *terra firma* of linguistic relatedness, ethnic and sub-ethnic cross-boarder relationships and singularity of colonial agenda, it leaned, at the same time and with a precarious weight, on a hollow reed marked by the underlying pre-colonial social formations around proto-nationalist tendencies. The post-1st. World War dispensation that ushered in and provided for a unified British control of the regional (colonial, territorial and mandatory) entities gave the region a foretaste of an externally driven experimentation with regional integration. A host of common services provided the relatively solid ground on which the regional body built its fledgling political and economic institutions. Built on unequal sovereignty and subjected to unequal colonial-capitalist under-development, the regional economy gravitated around Kenya's one-up-man ship in the institutional consolidation of market forces and substitutive industrial development. If colonial interests had been the political-economic site for the institutional organisation of the East African Community *Phase I*, the same interests, though strategically morphed into a new imperialist instrument would, later on, turn into a prime site for the reorganisation of the balance of social forces required to sustain and, if possible, outlast the historical limitations of the colonial project. Thus the post-colonial efforts aimed at deepening of the East African community agenda became a strategic victim of social class-formation manoeuvres by the sub-national elites, cutting their milk teeth in primitive accumulation of political-economic resources. Wrestling with the unique character of the challenges of national ruling class formation necessitated the need to operate within the narrow framework of a sheltered home turf under the sovereignty of a nation state. In Kenya where a powerful ruling class was already cutting its milk teeth, consolidating tribal hegemony around Kenyatta's presidency, the threat to a deeper regionalisation gained in reality and imminence. Much later, the post-colonial dynamics of regionalization in East Africa would later be over-determined by a host of factors ranging from:

- ◆ The institutional crystallisation of the hegemonic authority of the neo-colonial agents as an emerging social class mandated to re-organize the post-colonial political economy in favour of continued dependency on metropolitan interests.
- ◆ Domestication of ideological reflexes of the cold war.
- ◆ Emergence of neo-patrimonial states in the region as internal cleavages began to threaten, with considerable seriousness, the status quo built on the proto-hegemonic rule of the first generation leadership.

Together, these factors produced the historical conditions under which the East African Community Phase II found its provenance. Over-politicization of the regionalization agenda and unrealistic reliance on Westphalian anachronism pre-disposed individual state elites towards an obsession with the politics of absolute sovereignty which detracted from a strategic appreciation of synergy that would drive the regional economy under its own flag of interdependence. The left-leaning governments of Tanzania and Uganda under Mwalimu Julius Nyerere and Milton Obote respectively provided a convenient handle for the Kenyan based rightwing clique caballed around Charles Njonjo of Kenya to scuttle the project before it could claim local-community ownership. For Kenya to play its strategic role for Western monopoly capital, seeking to extend and consolidate a stronghold over a wider market from a safe ideological distance, it was strategically necessary to isolate it from the ideologically unwieldy, if not potentially hostile, East African community by dismantling the cooperation and having an easy time controlling member states individually, using Kenya as a strategic base. The upshot was that the East African Community *phase II* was condemned to die in the hands Kenya's rightwing agents of neo-colonial interests; so that the 1st Republican rule under Kenyatta would leave an indelible hegemonic mark on the Kenyan post colonial history.

The return of regionalism in East Africa – in the way of East African community *phase III* - has been materializing under a completely different international dispensation. For many observers, it hit the ground with deliberate pace that, for all practical purposes, reflected a powerful unity around a widely shared commitment to and justifiable nostalgia for a worthwhile project, previously undermined in its infancy by neo-colonial machinations and now pressing for a third round of historical legitimization. Yet, deep in the recess of popular memory of the East African people, East African community *phase II* had bequeathed member countries a seriously anaemic legacy: mistrust, uneven economic development, a new configuration of strategic interest of an increasingly uni-polarising world around hegemonic United States of America. Tanzania's role as a Front Line state, in the interim, had already drawn the East African Country away from its erstwhile neighbours and, as a result, launched it on gravitational path towards the South as an emerging political-economic centre of gravity in Africa. As a SADC member Tanzania is negotiating its return to the East African Community *phase III* wearing a tentative phase and with an understandable schizophrenic bearing: on the one hand it seems to relish the prospects of benefiting from updated historical ties with the neighbouring states; yet the legacy of a Front-line-state role, born of heroic engagement with decolonisation behind its southern borders, beguilingly draws it into the SADC arrangement; yet not necessarily away from a close collaboration with her East African neighbours. To be sure, it has been a relationship dogged more by strategic neglect rather than rancour. Sceptics may, however, cavil. With the cold wind of neo-liberalism blowing over the process of re-integration and as regionalism emerges forcefully as an integral part of the world trading environment, there has been an on-rush of market-friendly actors; each competing for a piece of the action through which the defining features of the East African community project will be etched in the historical consciousness of the people of the region.

It is important to take note of the fact that during both the East African Community phase I and II the level of integration was unevenly high in a limited number of areas - particularly in transport, migrant labour, trade, education etc. In these and other areas critical to the regional political economy, Kenyan actors in most of the above areas were dominant and therefore the region could best be analysed along center-periphery lines. The structural pattern of Kenyan dominance, developed mainly out of the colonial unequal underdevelopment of the region. The resulting unmistakable display of economic-capacity-differences led to asymmetrical integration of the national economies into the then unviable regional project.

Over time, three main categories of external forces have shaped the regional political economy and regionalism in East Africa: during, the colonial period it was the work of colonial capitalist expansion organising cheap labour and the colonial market for industrial goods from the metropolitan economy. Immediately after independence and particularly at the height of the cold war, the superpowers and their local agents played a leading role in giving political-economic content to the neo-colonial regionalism agenda; and at the return to the new regionalism, the multilateral financial institutions and bilateral donors and the power sites of the Global North have insinuated their neo-liberal interest into the regionalism project. The veneer of a rich and popular dialogue that is purported to have accompanied the East African states' recapture of domestic policy terrain alongside other non-state actors lost its gloss even before the regional project got off the ground. Regionalization from below remained a far cry from what was actually happening. Even the superficial engagement of the East African Business Community can hardly justify the community's claim of a popular rebirth.

The fundamental principles and objectives driving the process of East African regionalisation are as sound as they are aimed at addressing some of the problems which caused the demise of East African Common Services Organisation (1961-1966) and the East African Community phase II (1967-1977). The areas designated for cooperation such as:

- ◆ Trade Liberalisation and Development,
- ◆ Investment and Industrial Development,
- ◆ Standardisation, Quality Assurance, Metrology and Testing,
- ◆ Monetary and Financial cooperation,
- ◆ Infrastructure and Services,
- ◆ Development of Human Resources, Science and Technology,
- ◆ Agriculture and Food Sovereignty,
- ◆ Environment and Natural resources Management,
- ◆ Tourism and wildlife Management,
- ◆ The Private Sector and Civil Society,
- ◆ Legal and Judicial Affairs,
- ◆ Enhancing the role of Women in Socio-economic Activities,
- ◆ Free Movement of Persons, labour, Services, Right of Establishment and Residence etc.and

♦ Regional customs union.

lend themselves to easy implementation, provided that the organisation of the Community and the functional distribution of its organs are brought to proper alignment with the historic challenges facing the peoples of the region. For instance, the proposed Sectoral Councils, as the main vehicles for the implementation and monitoring of the regional development programmes, need not mimic the SADC arrangement, particularly given the unique history of the East African regionalisation effort. More innovative thinking needs to inform their composition and functioning in order for them to facilitate effective multi-jurisdictional regional processes. Only then will the day-to-day business of the community be conducted against an institutional backdrop of institutional arrangements that are intrinsically subject to constant negotiations by and re-invention of popular forces in the East African societies. Such popular forces can only add value to the regional project if they can risk taking value position on the tricky issues of privatisation, liberalisation and the giving of free reign to the market forces that are itching to colonize the regional space. Again, only then and then alone can the Northern muscle-flexing through the totems of post-modern colonisation be kept within harmless limits. If they remain a direct replication of the national governance structures, they will have difficulties shaking off some of the national sovereignty overhangs that are more than likely to arrest the process of regionalization and consign it into the national political muddle of merely enlarged national state bureaucracies and thereby upset the East African project. In fact, the people of East Africa are yet to witness the practice of political and institutional imagination in the materialisation of some of the critical organs of the community. The community is a live but it needs to draw its breath from the vital organs of its grassroots communities.

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