

## **East Africa Reborn**

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by Zachariah Cherian Mampilly

At a lavish ceremony in Arusha, Tanzania, late last year the presidents of Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda signed a treaty reincarnating the East African Community. Observers could be forgiven a sense of déjà vu. Forty years ago, on the eve of Independence in Tanzania (then Tanganyika), president-elect Julius Nyerere offered to delay independence of his country until both Uganda and Kenya were also free, in order to facilitate the formation of an East African Community. Nyerere firmly believed that regional integration had to come before the larger unification of the entire continent could take place. Out of this conviction emerged Africa's first attempt at regional integration, the East African Community (EAC). The EAC sputtered out of existence in 1977, a victim of cold war politics, mostly, but not before serving as a model for such other groupings as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), and Southern African Development Community (SADC).

To a large extent the nations of East Africa operate like a single community, in part as a holdover from the past two centuries of history, when they were grouped together under successive colonial regimes. In 1998, an East African Passport was introduced that allows citizens of any nation to cross borders of member states freely. East Africa nations are closely linked culturally, and Kiswahili, although not spoken everywhere, is gaining in popularity even in Uganda which traditionally had few speakers.

In 1984, seven years after the death of the first EAC – and after Nyerere, Kenya's Jomo Kenyatta, and Amin had all left power – the nations finally signed the East African Mediation Agreement, which allowed for the division of the assets and liabilities of the defunct EAC. Ironically, it was this same meeting that laid the seeds for the EAC's resurrection, although it took 15 years to actually happen. The Permanent Tripartite Commission, founded in 1993, became the foundation for the revamped East African Community. All three country's leaders – Yoweri Museveni of

Uganda, Daniel Mkapa of Tanzania and Daniel Arap Moi of Kenya – have been implementing confidence-building measures in order to create the proper environment for cooperation. According to the Tanzanian Foreign Minister, Jakaya Kikwete, in a statement given at the launching ceremony, "There is a greater harmony now at the ideological and political level and greater mutual understanding", as a result of such measures.

The agreement aims to establish a European Union-style common market and common currency for the region, plans that initially encountered reluctance from Tanzania and Uganda due to Kenya's obvious industrial advantage in a free trade situation. After more than a year of discussion and delay, the treaty now allays Tanzania's and Uganda's concerns by dropping a strict timeframe for the removal of trade restrictions. Most observers agree that the long-term goal – the economic and political union of the region – is at least twenty years away.

"Ultimately political integration will take place," says Joseph Tomusange, a Ugandan official. And some important structures are already in place: the East African Court of Justice, the East African Legislative assembly and Secretariat. Free currency convertibility, reduced tariffs between members, and significant cooperation on issues related to defense and foreign policy matters further signal the area's movement toward union.

A large crowd attended the treaty signing ceremony, held in an Arusha stadium. The governments of the three nations maintained that this current agreement has large support from the people, and in a joint statement the ministers declared that "the people of East Africa are determined to pool their resources together to better their standard of living." President Moi added, "This victory must not be ours only, but for all the people of East Africa." Thus far the idea of union has been widely heralded by average people living in the three countries. "I may be Ugandan by birth," says Ham Namakajjo, a Ugandan student now at the University of Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, "but my life is East African."

Critics of the community note that the three primary economies of the region are too similar in terms of what they produce, and too

unequal in economic levels, to have equal relations. Writing in *The Monitor*, a Ugandan daily, columnist Vincent E. Bua argues that by focusing on the idea of political union, proponents of the EAC have not looked at the economic viability of the project. He points out that uneven levels of economic growth will make it difficult to establish a common market in the region, without one country dominating, and others feeling left behind, and he cautions that hopes of East African unity have crashed before. Edwin Mtei, a former secretary-general of the defunct East African Community, warned that the current treaty's principle of consensus in decision making allows for a single leader of any member nation to veto any action by simply not agreeing to assent to it.

But supporters agree with President Mkapa, who says that the current treaty has "removed the devil that led our past leaders to disband the East African Community." Even played out against a history of failed alliance, they say, the EAC seems to have gotten off to a promising beginning. With the addition of Rwanda and perhaps eventually Burundi and Ethiopia – some even mention the Congo – the new EAC may just emerge as the cornerstone of a pan-African nation, much as Nyerere had envisioned some four decades ago.

About the Author

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Sources: *The Monitor* (Kampala), BBC News Online, *The East African*.