

The DRC's Accession to the EAC: A Zero-Sum Game in African Regional Bloc Formation

The East African Community (EAC) has announced that the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) has been accepted into the established community with full member status. As with other African undertakings, the decision appears to have been made without due process and engagement with the citizens of the existing member nations, particularly the African Union (AU).

As several of us have frequently articulated the primary impediment to the African unification goal from its inception, the project is not people-centred. The decision-making process on subregional and regional matters is restricted to the political elite, specifically the heads of state. As a result, the current sub-regional and regional bloc formations lack the mandate and authority to carry out the required commitments to benefit African citizens.

The admittance of the DRC to the EAC is illustrative of the recurring cycle of political leadership crises in postcolonial Africa. Consequently, it will be in conflict with the Abuja Treaty and impede efforts to develop African regional economic communities (RECs) as a whole. The AfCFTA preemie was understandable of multiple failures of strengthening the existing RECs. Such accession will make it worse, bringing DRC into established and progressing REC like EAC.

It is a bittersweet moment for those who have worked hard to accelerate the unification process in Africa by promoting the African Renaissance through various programmes. Unfortunately, the majority of African projects are one stride forward and two steps backwards, which is incredibly exhausting and shatters the hope.

Having the DRC as a member of numerous RECs will impose a burden on the country and impede the formation of subregional organisations and the establishment of a single economic and political society at the continental level. The Democratic Republic of the Congo is a member of the EAC, the Southern African Development Community (SADC), and the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS).

Without being philosophical, is DRC geographical in the East of Africa? Unless we answer such a trivial question, how can we dream of the bigger picture of African unification, which is an enormous and complex task? Such an unwise decision and action will bring back all EAC, SADC, and ECASA members and make the customs union and other administrative tasks and development projects harder.

This is partly the decision process joining and living the RECs are left only for the head of states and the role citizens as well as the AU and other organs either they do have any say or

insignificant. From the formation of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) till to date the role of citizens are none existent. As a result, all the unification agendas are left to the elites

Examining the historical context of the RECs arrangement, notably the paradox of the DRC's stance, is essential for a complete understanding. The dilemma of RECs is not unique to the Democratic Republic of the Congo; with a few exceptions, the majority of African nations fall into the same category. Except for the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), none of the regional economic communities (RECs) conform to the original Abuja Treaty.

The concept of RECs originated with the treaty establishing the African Economic Community (AEC), commonly known as the Abuja treaty. The pact was signed on 3rd June 1991 and became effective on 12th May 1994. At the time, the Organization of African Unity (OAU) suggested the establishment of five regional economic communities comprised of countries from North, West, Central, East, and Southern Africa.

The primary objectives of these RECs were to establish a free trade zone, harmonise tariff and non-tariff systems, establish a common market and adopt standard policies, integrate all sectors, establish a central bank and a single African currency, to establish an African monetary union, and to establish and elect the first Pan-African Parliament.

None of the RECs has met any of the above targets, even the initial steps, over the last two decades, and the projection period will expire in the next ten years. Originally DRC belonged to the Central Africa region Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS). The member States of ECCAS are Angola, Burundi, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, Congo, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Rwanda and Sao Tome and Principe.

Like all other RECs, ECCAS suffers from poor governance, a weak institutional framework, insufficient public expenditure, inadequate physical infrastructure and utilities, a lack of resources, and overlapping membership. As the region's most populous and geographically extensive country, the DRC should have taken the initiative to strengthen its own ECCAS bloc rather than joining SADC and EAC. A similar saying that I adapted to the DRC scenario:

"Some African nations want to join robust regional communities, while others establish or improve the one that already exists."

RECs are not an entity that can be joined arbitrarily without considering the long-term impact on national benefit and African unification. The DRC's first membership in SADC was a grave error, but naturally, there was considerable pressure from powerful countries in the region. The motivation for getting the DRC into SADC was not centred on people but rather an economic strategy. In spite of the fact that the DRC is a member of SADC, its residents are not permitted to roam freely within the area, whereas products are accepted.

By analysing the facts on the ground and the long-term benefits to the DRC, the region, and the continent, the decision is anticipated to be reversed. It was a mistake and miscalculation to bring the DRC into the EAC, just like it was to bring South Sudan, and such a haphazard step will impede EAC's modest success over other similar RECs.

By implication, it will wreak havoc on the internal processes of many RECs, most notably ECCAS, which will lose its already precarious status. As a result of the current duplication of membership, this generates a conflict of interest between SADC and EAC. Additionally, one nation joining multiple blocs results in a delay in the implementation of AfCFTA and a delay in the formation of a continental economic community.

The socio-cultural, philosophical, and psychological make-up of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) is most similar to that of Angola, Congo Brazzaville, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, and Sao Tome & Principe. The structure of these countries in the region is based on their geographical proximity, historical background, political climate, language commonalities, cultural linkages, and economic standing.

Given these realities, the DRC has only a tenuous connection to the EAC and SADC, and incorporating the existing ECCAS setup does not make sense. The "OAU-AU" has set a lofty target for African RECs. Still, they have fallen short for various reasons, including the top-down approach and lack of citizen participation, clientelism, unnecessary enlargement, and membership duplication.

Primarily, imperial ideology regards expansion regimes as African, which is entirely superfluous. Because if the AU succeeds in establishing a single economic society for all Africans, every nation benefits regardless of whether it is a member of the same RECs. The most perplexing aspect of this matrix is that when countries join or leave RECs, they do so without consulting citizens, appropriate national bodies, or the AU.

What matters in the contemporary framework of African politics is the sole duty and willingness of the head of state because popular opinion is irrelevant in the absence of accountability that requires an adequate response. Thus, the AU should establish a committee to examine and recommend appropriate reconfigurations of RECs. This step will assist in reducing duplication of effort, resource allocation, and confusion in the pursuit of a single economic community.

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