

# The Boston Globe

W E D N E S D A Y , J U L Y 1 7 , 2 0 0 2

CHARLES R. STITH

## A new voice in shaping Africa's future

*DURBAN, South Africa*  
ON JULY 9, amid fanfare and fireworks, 43 African heads of state ceremoniously pronounced the Organization for African Unity dead and heralded the birth of the African Union.

Putting aside the historical significance of the moment, the rationale for the change was rather pedestrian. The Organization for African Unity was founded almost 40 years ago to liberate Africa from colonialism and apartheid. Now that Africans have their countries back, the question is, how do they make them work.

With the founding of the African Union, the answer is: by extending democracy and free market reform across the continent.

While there is near universal agreement that democracy and free markets are critical to Africa's fulfilling its potential, even Africa's friends wonder whether the African Union is a false start or a good one toward achieving that end.

The reason for the concern is as obvious as it is legitimate.

With folks at the summit such as Zimbabwe's President Robert Mugabe, who stole his last election, and Libyan leader Moammar Khadafy, who refuses to hold an election, the question is: How real can this be?

I sat in on some of the sessions and heard African leaders discuss,

with real candor, the contradictions and challenges before them. Despite the irony of having some scoundrels in the room discussing free elections and transparent economies, there was a counterbalancing sentiment that pervaded the deliberations. It was: While the African Union (and what it represents) is clearly not where all of Africa is, the African Union (and what it represents) is what all of Africa must aspire to be.

That those gathered at the summit had the presence of mind and sense of history to appreciate that democracy and economic reform are where Africa's best interests lie is cause for optimism.

However, such optimism will be short-lived if the world, including Africans, stay riveted on the most difficult cases on the continent.

If that is the focus, the work ahead will be more daunting than it has to be. That is to say, if the early tests of the African Union's viability hinge on its ability to resolve the conflicts in Congo, Burundi, and Rwanda quickly and persuade Mugabe, Khadafy, and others to step aside, then it's over before it starts.

On the other hand, if the African Union and its allies focus on accelerating the development of countries where real strides are being made — such as Botswana, Benin, Cape Verde, Mali, Senegal, South Africa, Zambia, Ghana,

Tanzania, Malawi, and Mauritius — then there is a foundation on which to build.

If there is support and encouragement for countries with the promise to move toward real democratic rule — such as Mozambique, Uganda, and Angola — there is reason to believe the trend can continue.

If the African Union is to have half a chance to succeed, it will be because of the momentum it gets from playing to its strengths rather than concentrating its early efforts on trying to lift the dead weight of its more tragic cases.

That is not to say the most onerous cases won't have to be tackled. The question is, does the African Union front-load the heaviest lifting when it is weakest or does it wait until it has been strengthened by some successes. Such a strategy is key to the ability of the African Union to fulfill its potential.

At the end of the day, who knows whether the African Union is the "perfect" instrument to shape Africa's final form. Only time will tell. Maybe its leaders will discover, as ours did with the Continental Congress, that it takes more than such a framework to build the future they desire.

If that be the case, then I believe the worst history will report is that the African Union was a good start in the effort to provide hope and opportunity for all of Africa's people.

That commentary would not be a bad end to this beginning.

*Rev. Charles R. Stith is director of the African Presidential Archives and Research Center at Boston University.*