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Uganda's Yoweri Museveni and the East African Federation

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The East African Community (EAC) is again under the spotlight, as the supposed deadline for becoming a federation is closing in, compounded by Uganda's President Yoweri Museveni's statements concerning his role in the creation of the project.

The EAC was created in 1966, collapsed in 1977, and was finally restored in 2000. Today, it represents Africa's latest attempt to form a regional federation, which would be comprised of Uganda, Burundi, Rwanda, Kenya and Tanzania. The idea is to politically unite the five countries into the East African Federation until 2015. Having already established a common market for goods, labor and capital, a common currency is also expected to be adopted no longer than 2012, representing the ultimate step in building an economic federation. During colonial times, this region had already experienced some degree of political and economic convergence, although after independence disagreements between Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania accelerated the demise of the model.

Now there appears to be renewed drive to accomplish the federation. Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni, while pushing for the creation of this political unity, stated he was ready to cooperate with the EAC members to form a federation if they in turn established a limit for presidential terms. Yoweri Museveni, a politician involved in the war that deposed the infamous Idi Amin, assumed the Ugandan presidency in 1986. During this

time, Museveni was able to largely pacify the country – although there are still focus points of conflict, especially between the government and the Lord's Resistance Army – and bring about a satisfactory degree of economic development, when compared to previous Ugandan leaders. Yet, his latest crackdown on opposition parties reveals the true nature of Museveni's rule, and a glimpse of the backstage interests in creating the East African Federation. President Yoweri Museveni, who is due to be sworn in on May 12th, has been making extensive use of police and military forces to stop protesters and rioters from opposing his government.¹ With one eye on Tunisia and Egypt and another on his own backyard, Museveni is afraid the increasing prices of food and fuel in Uganda – as well as in other parts of the continent – might instigate the same popular reaction as in the African Arab states. Accused by the Ugandan opposition of mismanaging the country's economy, spending several millions on new aircraft and roughly US\$1.5 million on his own campaign,² Museveni is using the police and the army to silence opposing, critical voices. But the important questions are not only how Yoweri Museveni's actions and *modus operandi* will integrate into a political federation with

¹ "Ugandan opposition leaders sprayed pink to stop rally" (*BBC News*, 10 May 2011).

² "Kenya and Uganda: people power eludes East Africa" (*BBC News*, 20 April 2011).



other countries, but also how these five countries, each with their own conflicts and problems, will be able to integrate into a broader political union without exporting many of their social, political and economic issues to their partners.

A federation is one of the last degrees of power-sharing between political units. It has the ultimate purpose of transferring sovereignty from states into a new political centre, the federation. It has been used to prevent conflict between different ethnic groups, because it is underpinned by power-sharing options, which provide the necessary checks and balances to reduce political exclusion and under-representation. Yet, Yoweri Museveni, in power for 25 years, is a proponent of an idea which would ultimately force the establishment he created to partially shutdown. Perhaps the Ugandan President wants to be recognized as a strong statesman in the building of a greater political and economic country, or simply because having Uganda enter a federation would provide new markets for the country to export labor and import capital, although this would require Museveni to sacrifice his role as President. Yet, Museveni has stated that what matters is the development of the population, especially its health and education, not the presidential terms alone. Perhaps Uganda's President, who is relentless in silencing the opposition, understood that a broader political union would benefit his population. Indeed, if the federative project is materialized, the new state would quickly become one of the most populated, richest countries in Africa, with a slightly lower GDP than oil giant Angola. However, Museveni's own input into the Ugandan political system

is itself a negative contribution to the project. When the EAC was cancelled in 1977, one of the major disputes was the distribution of seats in parliament, opposing Kenya to Uganda and Tanzania. Museveni's crackdown on the opposition, besides silencing all Ugandan political voices and civil society, created an authoritarian culture which fails to demonstrate respect for political inclusion and representation, a culture that will undermine Uganda's integration into a broader political unit – with a heavy democratic nature – if President Yoweri Museveni is the one to represent Uganda.

Furthermore, besides Yoweri Museveni's troubles, many other issues are easily identifiable when thinking about a union between these five countries. There is still conflict in Uganda and Burundi, a conflict which would most likely be involuntarily adopted by all the federative states, especially by fragile Rwanda. While the Ugandan government is still at war with the Lord's Resistance Army, ethnic problems in neighbor Burundi could cross borders into Rwanda, which is recuperating from one of the most violent ethnic conflicts of the 20th century.

Above all, these types of initiatives are paving the way for the larger African integration and unity. The East African Community is already one of the pillars of the African Union. Yet, if the federation project is revealed to be premature, due to the lack of political maturation of each country's political class, the new East African state-project might only serve to create obstacles for other regions of the continent that choose to follow the same path. Perhaps such obstacles are ironically personified in the former freedom fighter, current Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni.

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