

Revitalising Pan-Africanism: Popular Power and Economic Integration in 21st Century Africa

Jonis Ghedi Alasow

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Abstract

The African continent's persistent condition is defined by the contradiction between its vast material wealth and widespread social poverty—a dynamic sustained by ongoing political and economic balkanisation. This reality represents a continuation of the historical injustices of slavery, colonialism, and neocolonialism. From the early consciousness-building work of diaspora intellectuals like W.E.B. Du Bois and Anna Julia Cooper to the watershed 1945 Manchester Conference, Pan-Africanism has been a vital political project underpinning national liberation struggles. Despite historic breakthroughs and continued resistance exemplified by figures like Thomas Sankara and, more recently, the Alliance of Sahel States, the need for an emancipatory politics geared towards unity and dignity for Africans and people of African descent remains urgent.

This paper builds on the rich biographical, historical, and theoretical traditions of Pan-Africanism to propose two critical elaborations for its contemporary application. First, the movement's protagonists must shift from state-centric institutions to popular political classes: trade unions, social movements, peasant organisations, and women's networks must be understood as the motive force for continental unity. Second, responding to the evolution of global capitalism, particularly since the 2008 financial crisis, Pan-Africanism must be understood as a dual project: the pursuit of political unity is inseparable from a concrete program of regional economic integration.

Through analysis of IMF neocolonial mechanisms, the Alliance of Sahel States, Sudan's revolutionary process, and women's economic integration practices, this paper demonstrates that economic sovereignty and continental unity will be achieved by organised workers, peasants, and communities—or not at all.

Introduction

African modernity was not born from Europe's colonial project, but from resistance to it. From the Haitian Revolution of 1791 to the defeat of Italian colonialism at the Battle of Adwa in 1896, African peoples, both within and outside the continent, have refused the plight imposed upon them (Fanon, 1963; Getachew, 2019). This resistance to colonialism and its logic is the foundation of Pan-Africanism, not as a romantic ideology but as a practical necessity forged through collective struggle against oppression.

Today, a fundamental contradiction persists at the heart of Africa's conjuncture: the continent, rich in material resources, is home to the world's largest concentration of poverty. Africa holds 30% of the world's mineral reserves, 8% of global natural gas reserves, 12% of global oil reserves, and 65% of the world's uncultivated arable land (African Development Bank, 2020). Yet in 2024, 429 million Africans—roughly one third of the population—lived below the so-called extreme poverty line of \$2.15 per day (World Bank, 2024).

Walter Rodney captured this paradox precisely: "In a way, underdevelopment is a paradox. Many parts of the world that are naturally rich are actually poor, and parts that are not so well off in wealth of soil and sub-soil are enjoying the highest standards of living" (Rodney, 1972, p. 20-21). This paradox is structural, maintained through what Samir Amin termed 'unequal exchange' (1976) and Walter Rodney identified as systematic underdevelopment (Rodney, 1972). This is structured, deliberate underdevelopment designed to maintain extractive relations.

Since 2008, this fundamental contradiction confronting the African continent has intensified catastrophically. Between 2008 and 2023, Africa's external debt exploded from \$205 billion to \$685.5 billion—an increase of 234%. Private creditors' share surged from 12% (\$25 billion) in 2008 to 25% (\$186 billion) by 2023. Critically, the share of concessional lending—low-interest loans with extended repayment periods that historically enabled development financing—declined sharply during this period, replaced by expensive commercial creditors charging 7-10% interest with short 5-10 year maturities (Afreximbank, 2024). This fundamental shift in debt composition, from patient development financing to profit-driven lending, represents a qualitative transformation in Africa's debt structure. Interest payments as a share of government expenditure rose from 3% in 2009 to 10% by 2023 (ISS Africa, 2025).

For the first time in African history, governments have been compelled to spend more on servicing debt than on educating their people. Resources that could build schools, train doctors, and develop industries instead flow to bondholders in New York and London—continuing the oscillation between extraction by overt military coercion and covert instruments of international finance which has animated colonial and neocolonial African history.

These paradoxes shape the modern reality of the African continent: material wealth alongside economic poverty, severe social needs contrasted with a downward spiral of debt dependency. This situation demands urgent attention, as it is the people and the environment that suffer most from the ongoing failure to resolve these contradictions. The liberation era of the 1960s provides important lessons—the importance of political education, the need for class analysis, and the dangers of comprador collaboration.

However, conditions in the 2020s have changed significantly: debt arrangements have evolved, class structures have shifted, and people's movements and organisations such as trade unions, social movements, and peasant groups have also transformed. Moreover, the geopolitical landscape has changed. This paper aims to contribute to vital debates on how to address these dilemmas facing Africa and humanity.

Imperialism and Neocolonialism in the 21st Century

Africa's condition cannot be understood without theoretical clarity about imperialism and neocolonialism. These are not outdated concepts but frameworks that explain contemporary reality with precision. We have clearly seen how imperialism operates through systematic mechanisms that violently extract wealth from peripheral countries in the global south, including Africa, thereby enriching core imperialist countries while preventing meaningful development. The Democratic Republic of Congo illustrates the pattern: holding resources valued at an estimated \$24 trillion (UNEP, 2011), yet over 70 million people (approximately 65% of the population) lack basic access to water (World Bank, 2024), despite the country possessing more than half of Africa's freshwater reserves (UNICEF; UNEP, 2011). This represents deliberate underdevelopment—an active prevention of development because it would threaten existing extraction relationships.

These extraction relationships operate through five monopolies first systematically identified by Samir Amin (1997). These are: technology (patents and intellectual property preventing technology transfer); finance (dollar dominance and control of international financial institutions); resources (multinational corporations controlling extraction); communications and media (shaping global narratives); and weapons of mass destruction (military power backing economic extraction). Debt has been among the primary mechanisms through which these imperialist monopolies were consolidated, reflecting systematic integration into global finance on subordinate terms. Military power—US AFRICOM and French bases across the continent—remains the backstop when coercive financial mechanisms, such as debt, prove insufficient.

Neocolonialism represents the contemporary form through which this imperial domination continues to operate, differing from colonialism in form, rather than substance. Where colonialism required direct political control—administrators, governors, colonial bureaucracies—neocolonialism maintains formal independence while exercising control through economic mechanisms and comprador classes serving as proxies.

Kwame Nkrumah identified this transformation in 1965: "The essence of neo-colonialism is that the State which is subject to it is, in theory, independent and has all the outward trappings of international sovereignty. In reality, its economic system and thus its political policy is directed from outside" (Nkrumah, 1965, Introduction). This assessment is not an outdated 20th-century reference, but a reality that has followed the continent into the 21st century. Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni, for example, observes that decolonisation "only resulted in changing the content of the language of engagement between Africa and the Western powers" (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013, p. 302).

Neocolonialism operates through linked mechanisms that work in concert to maintain domination, fundamentally setting the parameters for so-called independence. At its core, neocolonialism establishes strict boundaries beyond which African nations dare not venture. Any leader who threatens to break from these conditions of subordination faces violent suppression through coups or assassination.

The historical record is unambiguous: Patrice Lumumba was assassinated in 1961 with Western intelligence complicity for threatening Belgian mineral interests; Kwame Nkrumah was overthrown in a CIA-backed coup in 1966 for pursuing genuine sovereignty; Amílcar Cabral was assassinated in 1973 before Guinea-Bissau's liberation was complete; Steve Biko was murdered in detention in 1977 for articulating Black Consciousness that challenged white supremacy; Thomas Sankara was murdered in 1987 for pursuing economic independence; Chris Hani was assassinated in 1993 as he threatened to radicalise South Africa's transition; and Muammar Gaddafi was killed in 2011 after challenging French neocolonialism and proposing an African currency. Throughout this period, leaders like Julius Nyerere, who pursued self-reliance, faced systematic economic sabotage aimed at discrediting alternatives to neocolonial integration.

These were not isolated incidents but a systematic pattern: neocolonialism tolerates formal independence only insofar as it maintains substantive subordination. Leaders who truly challenge this arrangement are eliminated, ensuring that African sovereignty remains constrained within acceptable limits defined by imperialist interests.

The mechanisms of this constrained sovereignty operate economically through debt and structural adjustment that dictate policy; currency controls (exemplified by the CFA franc); trade agreements that favour external capital; and privatisation, which transfers public assets into foreign ownership. Politically, neocolonialism works by supporting comprador elements

through training, funding, and legitimisation; destabilising people-centred governments through sanctions, coups, and assassinations; and military intervention when necessary. Ideologically, 'good governance' discourse deflects from structural plunder; 'corruption' narratives blame victims; and development theories attribute poverty to African 'failure' rather than extraction.

The Failure of State-Led Integration

The Comprador Bourgeoisie and National Liberation

As Claude Ake observed in his early career, "...the indigenous capitalist class in many African countries are agents of Western capital and by extension part of the structure of the imperialist exploitation of Africa" (Ake, 1981, p. 138). In Africa, a national bourgeoisie with interests independent of international finance capital does not form a hegemonic class.

While individuals who could constitute a national bourgeoisie may exist, they do not make up a single class with shared interests working to assert hegemony over the state. Without a national bourgeoisie holding political power, there is no unified effort for a national economic project. On the contrary, from the perspective of the comprador bourgeoisie, which is hegemonic over state power in most African countries, genuine development is avoided as it would oppose the very interests of this comprador class. Breaking the dominance of the comprador bourgeoisie is therefore a prerequisite for breaking with imperialism and advancing the Pan-Africanist struggle.

Understanding neocolonialism clarifies the strategic questions essential to contemporary Pan-Africanism. Complete national liberation cannot rely on a 'progressive national bourgeoisie', as no sufficiently robust national bourgeoisie exists; instead, the ruling class is a comprador bourgeoisie.

In the absence of a motivated and patriotic national bourgeoisie as a class, alliances to break neocolonial relations must centre on workers, peasants, the urban poor and (where feasible) patriotic individuals beyond these groups. Breaking neocolonial ties relies on removing comprador groups from power, not simply implementing different policies within existing structures. Only once the unpatriotic comprador bourgeoisie has been cleared from the path can the incomplete national and continental liberation struggle be revived and the momentum lost after the initial breakthroughs of the second half of the 20th century be regained.

The Neocolonial State and the Failure of Substantive Integration

Pan-Africanism's historical trajectory reveals a persistent, dialectical contradiction. Whilst the movement originated in popular struggle—from Marcus Garvey's mass mobilisation to the independence movements of the 1950s and 1960s—its institutional expression became increasingly dominated by comprador elites operating through state structures designed for extraction rather than development. The Organisation of African Unity (OAU), established in 1963, epitomised this shift, especially following the transition to the African Union (AU) in 2002. As Shivji recounts, Nyerere himself, one of the OAU's founding fathers, 'angrily condemn[ed]' the organisation as a 'trade union of African leaders/states' (Shivji, 2006, p. 28). The failure was not that states were involved in integration efforts, but that neocolonial states controlled by comprador classes became dominant and pursued integration in ways that preserved rather than challenged extractive relationships.

This model produced predictable failures. The Lagos Plan of Action (1980) called for reduced dependence on the West through intra-African trade, yet implementation relied entirely on the

willingness of comprador-controlled governments that never materialised. The Abuja Treaty (1991) envisioned an African Economic Community by 2028, yet by 2023, intra-African trade had risen to only 15% of total African trade—still far below Europe (67%) and Asia (60%), and a figure that required over four decades to merely double from the 6% recorded in the late 1980s (Afreximbank, 2024; Elbadawi, 1997). The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), launched in 2021, reproduces these patterns. Despite commitments to eliminate 90% of tariffs progressively, actual trade under the agreement remains minimal because the fundamental character of state structures and their class orientation has remained unchanged.

Why this persistent failure to build unity? The answer lies in the convergence of multiple elements: the demobilisation of the mass base that had secured advances in national liberation; the coups and assassinations of leaders who sought genuine sovereignty alongside their peoples; and crucially, the class character of post-colonial states inherited from colonialism. African states inherited not just borders but entire economic structures designed for extraction (Arrighi & Saul, 2023). Trade infrastructure—roads, railways, ports—remained oriented towards former colonial metropoles. Railways run from interior mines to coastal ports—built to move resources out, not to integrate internally.

Most countries still export raw materials, then import manufactured goods. This is not accidental inheritance—it's actively maintained through debt mechanisms, monetary control, and the material interests of comprador classes who control state apparatuses. The persistence of this pattern is evident across the continent: in Zambia, railways continue to transport copper to ports for export rather than connecting to neighbouring countries' industrial centres; in Côte d'Ivoire, cocoa travels to European chocolate manufacturers whilst West African attempts at regional processing face systematic obstruction through tariff structures and credit access; in the Democratic Republic of Congo, cobalt extraction by multinational corporations continues whilst cross-border economic integration with Angola, Zambia, and Tanzania remains minimal despite geographic proximity and complementary economies.

Here we must remind ourselves that, as Lenin demonstrated, the state is an organ of class rule (Lenin, 1918). Post-colonial African states, captured by classes whose wealth derives from intermediation with external capital, cannot spontaneously become vehicles for popular liberation or genuine integration whilst under comprador control. Ruling classes in these states derived their wealth and power from controlling resource flows to external markets—integration threatened these arrangements by potentially disrupting their role as intermediaries.

Kwame Nkrumah recognised that substantive transformation required not just utilising existing state structures but fundamentally reorienting them through revolutionary forces: "It is from among [revolutionary intellectuals] that the genuine intellectuals of the African Revolution are to be found... It is the task of this third section of the intelligentsia to enunciate and promulgate African revolutionary socialist objectives, and to expose and refute the deluge of capitalist propaganda and bogus concepts and theories poured out by the imperialist, neocolonialist and indigenous, reactionary mass communications media" (Nkrumah, 1970, p. 39). The issue was never whether states could play roles in integration, but which class interests controlled those states and to what ends.

The failure of elite-led integration through institutions like the OAU reflects more than institutional weakness—it is the consequence of the demobilisation of the very social forces that secured initial breakthroughs in the still incomplete national liberation struggles, combined with the consolidation of comprador classes whose material interests align with continued imperialism. These are not merely 'corrupt officials' but a coherent class formation: technocrats

trained at World Bank institutes, finance ministers transitioning to IMF consultancies, central bank governors implementing policies designed in Washington. Their control of state apparatuses explains why state-led integration efforts systematically failed—not because states as such cannot pursue integration, but because neocolonial states controlled by comprador interests *will not*.

Ghana's trajectory, for example, illustrates how the comprador bourgeoisie enabled neoliberal subjugation. The country transitioned from Kwame Nkrumah's socialist Pan-Africanism to becoming an IMF 'success story' at the hands of collaboration between the local comprador bourgeoisie and the beneficiaries of neocolonialism. The 1966 coup against Nkrumah, supported by CIA intervention as revealed in declassified documents, initiated the dismantling of his industrialisation projects and shifted Ghana from an inspiration for national liberation struggles to a country which has signed 17 IMF deals, thus capitulating to what emerged as the Washington Consensus.

The Economic Imperative and the Costs of Fragmentation

Economic integration is the only viable path for development, prosperity, and dignity in Africa. This is not an ideological point, but a concrete reality grounded in material conditions. No alternative to economic integration can break the whirlpool of destitution and the continent's subservience. Africa's fragmentation into 54 separate markets, each too small to achieve economies of scale, ensures continued dependency and underdevelopment. Integration would create a market of 1.5 billion people capable of supporting industrialisation, negotiating favourable terms with external partners on equal terms, and building value chains that process resources where they are extracted rather than shipping them out of the continent raw.

The imperative for economic integration stems from necessity. Africa's fragmentation enables exploitation through multiple mechanisms. First, small economies lack bargaining power in global commodity markets. Second, fragmentation prevents economies of scale in production. Africa's division into 54 separate markets—many of them small, landlocked economies—prevents the economies of scale achievable through continental integration, a challenge the African Union's Agenda 2063 explicitly identifies as requiring a continental-wide market to enhance industrial competitiveness (African Union, 2015). Third, separate infrastructure systems multiply costs.

Africa has the world's lowest electricity access rate—approximately 47% in Sub-Saharan Africa, leaving nearly 600 million people without power (World Bank, 2024). Electricity costs in Sub-Saharan Africa are two to three times higher than in other developing regions. At the same time, per capita consumption remains the lowest globally at just 750 kWh compared to over 3,000 kWh worldwide (BloombergNEF, 2024). The AfDB estimates that Africa needs between \$130 billion and \$170 billion annually in infrastructure investment; current investment falls far short, leaving an annual financing gap of \$68 to \$108 billion (AfDB, 2023).

Africa is presently investing less than 3% of its GDP in net fixed capital formation. As economist John Ross demonstrates in his analysis of economic efficiency, "the decisive factor in economic growth is not gross investment, but Net Fixed Capital Formation—the actual increase in productive capacity after accounting for depreciation." Ross shows that "depreciation of fixed capital" consumes a significant portion of gross investment, meaning the net increase in productive capacity determines growth potential (Ross, 2023). While African economies often report gross investment rates approaching 20% of GDP, the high rate of capital consumption means the net increase in productive capacity is usually less than 3% of GDP.

This level is insufficient for industrialisation, as confirmed by World Bank and AfDB data showing that the majority of infrastructure spending is consumed by maintenance rather than expansion. In contrast, during crises, China's large state sector has enabled it to increase net fixed capital formation—for example, between 2007-2009, "China's net fixed investment rose by \$534 billion. China's capital stock was significantly greater in 2009 than in 2007, increasing its potential for long term growth," while "the U.S. capital stock was lower than in 2007, lowering U.S. potential for long term growth" (Ross, 2023). This demonstrates that effective countercyclical stimulus requires not merely expenditure but also institutional capacity to sustain productive investment during crises—a capacity that fragmented African economies structurally lack.

The cost of non-integration is calculable. UNCTAD estimates that Africa's untapped export potential amounts to \$21.9 billion annually, equivalent to 43% of current intra-African exports (UNCTAD, 2021). The World Bank projects that full AfCFTA implementation could boost African incomes by \$450 billion by 2035 and lift 30 million people from poverty (World Bank, 2020). More fundamentally, integration is a prerequisite for industrialisation. Every successful case of late industrialisation relied on protected domestic markets large enough to achieve scale economies. Africa's 1.5 billion people represent equivalent potential, but only if fragmentation is overcome.

The 2008 global financial crisis marked a watershed, revealing how fragmentation leaves individual countries vulnerable to external shocks. Before 2008, Africa had experienced declining debt burdens due to debt relief initiatives. The crisis reversed these trends catastrophically. As global credit markets froze, capital flows to Africa collapsed. Commodity prices plummeted. African countries, needing counter-cyclical stimulus but lacking resources, turned to expensive borrowing.

When the 2008 global financial crisis struck, advanced economies deployed counter-cyclical measures—increasing government spending precisely when private demand collapsed to maintain employment and prevent economic catastrophe. This approach, codified by John Maynard Keynes in his seminal work, *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money* (1936), has become standard operating procedure for advanced economies.

The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated this starkly: the United States injected over \$5 trillion into its economy (including the \$2.2 trillion CARES Act of March 2020), whilst the European Union launched a €750 billion recovery fund. These massive interventions were possible because these economies possessed deep fiscal reserves and access to credit at near-zero interest rates. In contrast, during the same COVID-19 crisis, Kenya was forced to cut health spending by 20% in 2020 despite the pandemic, as debt service consumed 37% of government revenue (ISS Africa, 2025). Similarly, Ghana spent \$1.3 billion on debt service in 2020—nearly three times its entire health budget—whilst simultaneously requesting emergency IMF support that came with conditions requiring further austerity measures.

Across most of Africa, decades of structural adjustment had eliminated fiscal buffers, whilst global credit markets offered only punitive terms precisely when resources were most needed. Moreover, an effective counter-cyclical response requires not merely expenditure but the institutional capacity to increase Net Fixed Capital Formation *during* crises. African economies, with Net Fixed Capital Formation rates below 3% of GDP and lacking large state sectors capable of counter-cyclical investment, faced a double constraint: unable to borrow affordably, and lacking institutional mechanisms to maintain productive investment even when borrowing did occur.

What followed was an unprecedented debt explosion, with its composition shifting towards expensive private debt with high interest rates (often 7-10%), short maturities (5-10 years), and no grace periods—purely profit-driven investors demanding full repayment regardless of social costs. These institutionalised loan sharks are what Thomas Sankara had in mind when he declared at the 1987 OAU Summit: "We cannot repay the debt because we have nothing to pay it with... Those who led us into debt were gambling, as if they were in a casino. As long as they were winning, there was no problem. Now that they're losing their bets, they demand repayment" (Sankara, 1987). This debt crisis has become what Bonnie K. Campbell and John Loxley identify as "the Trojan horse for an assault against the abbreviated project for the construction of Third World sovereignty" (Campbell & Loxley, 1989, p. 6).

The burden became crushing. For some countries, the burden was catastrophic: Angola spent 50% of government expenditure on debt service in 2023; Zambia defaulted in 2020; Ghana required its 17th IMF bailout in 2022. Campbell and Loxley's observation remains poignant: "Since 1980 almost forty African governments have turned to the IMF for balance of payments support... Never before have the international financial institutions wielded such pervasive influence on policy formulation in Africa: not since the days of colonialism have external forces been so powerfully focused to shape Africa's economic structure and the nature of its participation in the world system" (Campbell & Loxley, 1989, p. 6).

This post-2008 reality makes economic integration existentially necessary. Individual countries cannot generate counter-cyclical resources during crises; regional pooling could. Individual countries cannot bargain effectively with bondholders; collective negotiation could. Individual countries cannot build manufacturing capacity in small markets; integration creates viable markets and value chains. The Alliance of Sahel States demonstrates what is possible when countries break free of fragmentation and assert sovereignty collectively.

Women's Leadership in Pan-African Integration

Fortunately, the aforementioned imperative for economic integration has already been organically embraced by the continent's women. Informal cross-border traders account for 90% of formal trade flows, with 43% of Sub-Saharan Africa's population—approximately 450 million people—deriving livelihoods from this trade (Afrika & Ajumbo, 2012; ECA, 2023). These traders—predominantly women—navigate complex terrain, building trade networks that connect distant markets and constitute genuine economic integration. In certain regions, women's trade dominates: Uganda's informal agricultural exports to neighbouring countries equalled 75% of official agricultural exports; among Rwanda's four neighbours, informal trade accounted for 59% of total exports; in Cameroon's border regions, informal trade accounted for 96% of total trade (Bouët et al., 2008; 2009).

What authorities call 'smuggling' is, in fact, survival, community provision, and regional economic integration. It is a progressive economic practice that subverts the artificial borders drawn at the Berlin Conference 140 years ago. This integration operates through distinct mechanisms: kinship and ethnic networks predating colonial borders (Fulani trading networks spanning West Africa, Hausa trade routes connecting Nigeria and Niger, Somali commercial networks linking the Horn); informal credit systems based on trust and reciprocity; and information sharing through social networks allowing rapid market adjustment.

The central role of women extends far beyond trade to revolutionary organising and leadership in liberation struggles. They have historically been pioneers in the struggle to articulate and construct a liberated future for the continent. Once more, they are protagonists of political and economic programs for integration and unity in Africa. Historical and contemporary evidence

demonstrate women's tremendous role as revolutionary leaders despite the deafening silence around their contributions in much of mainstream discourse.

In Sudan, women led many Resistance Committees, organising neighbourhood assemblies that coordinated the uprising against al-Bashir and continued functioning even amid war. In the Alliance of Sahel States, women participated in mass demonstrations demanding sovereignty, forming a crucial base of popular support.

Ousmane Sembène's novel, *God's Bits of Wood*, revived the role of women as the heart and soul of the historic 1946 Dakar Railworkers' strike—demonstrating how women's revolutionary leadership was central to one of Africa's most significant labour struggles. Contemporary movements from Somalia to South Africa show women leading land occupation movements, organising informal sector workers, and building community resistance to eviction and displacement.

Yet, today, women face systematic violence from the states whose commitment to unity and integration remains rhetorical. Border guards demand bribes, confiscate goods, and perpetrate sexual violence. States criminalise women's trade as 'smuggling' whilst permitting multinational corporations to extract resources freely. Formal credit systems exclude women traders, forcing them to rely on informal mechanisms. This contradiction—women achieving a substantial degree of integration and leading revolutionary movements despite state obstruction whilst remaining marginalised—reveals both the incoherence of Africa's balkanisation and the revolutionary potential of women's leadership in organising the African people.

Contemporary Pan-Africanism must therefore: (1) centre women's existing integration efforts and defend their revolutionary gains; (2) ensure women's autonomous organisation and leadership within broader movements; (3) recognise that dismantling patriarchy and capitalism are interconnected struggles; (4) protect women traders and organisers from state violence; (5) guarantee women's leadership in building new institutions; (6) document and amplify women's revolutionary contributions to Pan-African struggles; (7) ensure that women's role is understood not as auxiliary but as central protagonists in the transformation of Africa for the benefit of its peoples.

The Alliance of Sahel States: Popular Forces Reclaiming Sovereignty

The French role across the Sahel region of Africa has been fundamentally disingenuous. France had been directly responsible for creating the crisis conditions that ultimately led to the formation of the AES by pushing NATO to destroy Libya in 2011, eliminating Gaddafi's government and transforming a stable state into a failed one. This NATO intervention, led by France, flooded the Sahel with weapons and fighters, destabilising the entire subregion (Forte, 2012). French forces subsequently encouraged and indirectly supported various insurgent groups whilst pretending to fight them, creating a permanent state of crisis that justified continued military presence (Turse, 2023).

This development is not a new phenomenon. As Firoze Manji and Sokari Ekine document, "The creation of AFRICOM and the subsequent militarisation of the continent has been accompanied by the growth of Islamic fundamentalist groups" (Manji & Ekine, 2012, p. 15). NATO deliberately caused and sustained the crisis of terrorism to create a war zone across the Sahel, facilitating the extraction of mineral wealth and dissuading migrants from making the dangerous trip across the Sahara to seek opportunities in Europe. This manufactured crisis

served multiple French and European interests: maintaining military bases, ensuring access to uranium and other resources, and preventing migration to Europe.

French corporations dominated the extractive sectors. In Niger, French state-owned Orano controlled uranium mining, paying Niger prices far below market rates. Niger supplied 20% of France's uranium at exploitative terms, whilst 82% of Niger's population lacked access to electricity (Tricontinental, 2024). Despite sitting atop world-class uranium reserves, Nigeriens remained in energy poverty. This contradiction epitomises neocolonial extraction and did not go unnoticed by the populations.

Popular discontent erupted in mass mobilisations that created conditions forcing state transformation. In Mali, massive protests against corruption and subservience to French Imperialism created conditions where military intervention aligned with popular demands rather than suppressing them. On August 18, 2020, Colonel Assimi Goïta seized power—crucially, this was not a coup against popular movements but one that complemented popular demands. Thousands celebrated in Bamako's streets. Burkina Faso followed a similar trajectory on January 24, 2022, with Lieutenant Colonel Paul-Henri Sandogo Damiba, and when Damiba proved insufficiently willing to break with France, a second intervention on September 30, 2022, brought Captain Ibrahim Traoré to power. Niger completed the pattern on July 26, 2023.

On September 16, 2023, the heads of state of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger signed the Liptako-Gourma Accord in Bamako, establishing the Alliance of Sahel States as a mutual defence pact. In January 2024, all three countries withdrew from ECOWAS. On July 6, 2024, they formally established the Confederation of Sahel States.

What distinguishes this from the OAU model? The class forces driving it and the material break with neocolonialism. Unlike elite pacts that preserve extraction, the AES emerged mainly in response to popular pressure, which compelled governments to terminate agreements with French nuclear and mining companies, expel French military bases, and renegotiate the terms of resource extraction. This represents not 'state-led integration' in the failed OAU sense, but rather a different model that includes the popular forces and state power as critical pillars for a definitive break with neocolonial relationships.

Most significantly, the AES moved towards genuine economic sovereignty. All three countries terminated agreements with French nuclear and mining companies and began renegotiating the terms. Burkina Faso signed agreements with Russia's Rosatom to develop nuclear power to generate electricity. Niger began pressing Orano for fair uranium prices. In Mali and Burkina Faso, the means of production are being reclaimed from imperialist monopoly capital. Large-scale electrification projects are underway, nuclear power plants are being built to promote clean energy, and agricultural self-sufficiency is on the agenda (Tricontinental, 2024).

Evidence of popular support for the AES is substantial. When ECOWAS threatened intervention in Niger, enormous crowds—estimated at 60,000—rallied in Niamey (Tricontinental, 2024). This support reflects the class dynamics dominant in Africa. The urban working class, women and unemployed youth—those who suffered most from the neocolonial status quo—provide the social base for qualitative shifts in the concrete expression of African sovereignty.

The AES's economic integration efforts deserve particular attention. Ministers acknowledged that 70-80% of cross-border commerce occurs informally. Rather than criminalising this trade, they moved to facilitate it through simplified border procedures and designated small trader lanes. This approach contrasts sharply with AfCFTA's state-led, institutional focus. Cross-border trade between AES countries increased 17% in the first year despite minimal formal policy changes (Afreximbank, 2024).

Despite prevailing contradictions, the AES represents significant development in the Pan-African struggle. It demonstrates that breaking neocolonial relationships remains possible, that economic integration must be grounded in political and territorial sovereignty, that popular mobilisation rather than elite negotiation drives change, and that even when formal leadership comes from military actors, popular organisation determines outcomes.

Sudan: Popular Power, and Its Limits

Another pertinent example comes from Sudan, where the revolutionary process achieved a breakthrough on 19 December 2018, exemplifying popular power at its most advanced. What started as economic protests against bread price hikes developed into a comprehensive, popular uprising calling for an end to dictatorship. The uprising succeeded in removing Omar al-Bashir on 11 April 2019. The organisational structure was notable: local Resistance Committees—neighbourhood-based assemblies—coordinated protest activities democratically. Communist-led professional associations organised multiple sectors of Sudanese society. Women played a central role in the organisation, leading many local committees.

The military's reaction was expected. On 3 June 2019, security forces attacked the sit-in, killing over 120 people. This massacre aimed to crush the movement. Instead, civil disobedience grew stronger. Eventually, the military agreed to a compromise: a transitional power-sharing deal. This proved unstable. On 25 October 2021, General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan carried out a coup.

On April 15, 2023, war erupted between the Sudanese Armed Forces under Burhan and the Rapid Support Forces paramilitary, composed mainly of reconstituted Janjaweed fighters who had been responsible for previous humanitarian catastrophes in Sudan. This war, continuing into 2025, has devastated Sudan: over 150,000 deaths, millions displaced, famine conditions, and complete economic collapse. Yet even amid catastrophe, Resistance Committees continue functioning, providing humanitarian assistance and maintaining structures of popular power.

Sudan's experience offers crucial lessons that inform contemporary Pan-African strategy. First, popular organisation matters enormously—the Resistance Committees' capacity proved decisive in removing Bashir, despite what appeared to be a well-entrenched regime. Second, popular power must be institutionalised to endure; without popular organisations becoming hegemonic over the military and the state apparatus, popular mobilisation remains vulnerable to both co-option and repression. Finally, regional solidarity matters desperately—Sudan needed active solidarity that never materialised and, to date, has not materialised at a sufficiently impactful scale. Those committed to Pan-Africanism today must develop the capacity for such solidarity or watch isolated movements crushed as we look on.

Towards a New Pan-Africanism: Organisational Architecture

Continental economic integration and political unity (i.e., Pan-Africanism) will be achieved only by the social forces capable of bringing about this much-needed change of course: organised workers, peasants, and oppressed communities, or it will not be achieved at all. State-led integration has failed for seventy years because states structured for extraction cannot easily be reoriented as vehicles for integration and unity without fundamental transformation.

The comprador bourgeoisie has interests that run contrary to Pan-Africanism—it threatens their intermediary role and challenges their accumulation strategies that facilitate extraction. The national bourgeoisie varies between not existing at all, not being sufficiently developed, and lacking political power when it does exist.

As such, the only social forces that can be relied on to bring about the aforementioned fundamental shift are, more or less, the same ones that brought about the initial breakthroughs in national liberation struggles: workers, peasants, the urban poor, and all other patriotic segments of society (including the intelligentsia, elements of the national bourgeoisie, and students). These social groups, despite their diversity, must be pulled together, as they can collectively be the only vehicle for ushering in this next phase of Pan-African struggle—a Pan-Africanism that sees African unity as a material reality rooted in social and economic relations.

Building Popular Pan-Africanism: Organisational Imperatives

Building popular Pan-Africanism requires concrete organisational strategies, not just programmatic statements. Historical experience and contemporary struggles offer models that we must learn from and adapt to present conditions. Workers must build sector-specific networks that coordinate concrete struggles—dockers, miners, public sector workers, informal workers—organising joint campaigns, sharing strike funds, training organisers across borders, and developing common demands. The 1946 railworkers' strike in Dakar, or the African mineworkers' strike in the same year, demonstrated workers' capacity to shake states; continental coordination multiplies this power.

Peasants should follow La Via Campesina's model, echoing Sam Moyo's emphasis on the centrality of the agrarian question to national liberation, and build continental coordination around: land rights against corporate seizure; seed sovereignty against GMO imposition; agricultural policy opposing export orientation; water access and irrigation infrastructure; resistance to land grabs and contract farming arrangements.

Women traders need a continental organisation. The hundreds of millions in informal cross-border trade require: assemblies of women traders by region and sector; coordination on border policies, tariffs, and harassment; shared credit mechanisms spanning borders; information networks on market conditions, regulations, and security; and a unified voice demanding policy changes that serve integration rather than fragmentation.

Sudan's Resistance Committees model neighbourhood-based instruments of popular power that coordinate action, provide services, and maintain organisation despite repression. Replicating this across Africa means: popular assemblies at the community level; delegates coordinating between assemblies (not bureaucracies above them); assemblies addressing immediate needs (food, water, security) whilst building political consciousness; and cross-border coordination between assemblies in border regions.

Trade unions hold particular strategic importance in the contemporary context. As Praveen Jha, Walter Chambati, and Lyn Ossome observe, "In Africa, the intricate nexus of colonialism, post-colonialism and unfettered capitalism has been the stimulus for trade unions to broaden the scope of their struggles beyond the shop floor to embrace liberation, democracy, promotion of economic development, social reconstruction and justice in the current neo-liberal world order" (Jha, Chambati & Ossome, 2016, p. 294). They further note that "Among the various social justice organisations, trade unions have the greatest potential for political mobilisation... and perhaps the most capable ones with visible and legally acknowledged national structures that have clarity in defined membership" (Jha, Chambati & Ossome, 2016, p. 294). The responsibilities of trade unions for advancing the imperative for a new Pan-Africanism are therefore significant.

Organising in this sense proceeds through stages that must be consciously pursued: (1) building sectoral and territorial networks; (2) establishing cross-border coordination in adjacent regions; (3) developing continental communication and coordination mechanisms; (4) launching

continent-wide campaigns on specific demands; (5) creating permanent continental peoples institutions. These elements cannot be pursued in a linear, teleological fashion—different regions proceed at different paces—but require a common, conscious strategy. The goal: by the time revolutionary crises emerge (as in Sudan 2019, Sahel 2023), organisational capacity exists for popular forces to maintain momentum and make concrete gains, preventing opportunism or repression from filling power vacuums.

Economic integration requires concrete interventions that serve popular interests: protected regional markets for infant industries, following the successful East Asian model; state-owned enterprises in strategic sectors; technology-transfer requirements for foreign investment; support for regional value chains that process resources where they are extracted; and coordinated agricultural policy to ensure food sovereignty.

This trajectory cannot be rooted in the AfCFTA's neoliberal 'free trade' approach. Instead, it must be rooted in managed integration serving development. These include: protections for small farmers and informal traders; common external tariffs protecting African industries from dumping; rules of origin preventing transnationals using AfCFTA whilst producing elsewhere; infrastructure investment facilitating actual trade flows; recognition and protection of informal cross-border trade. Democratic control over extraction decisions; state ownership of extractive industries (or majority stakes); requirements that extracted resources benefit local populations through processing, employment, and infrastructure; ability to refuse extraction damaging the environment or communities; tax systems capturing resource rents for development.

The Question of Political Power

Importantly, the question of political power cannot be ignored. While the organisational proposals and instruments outlined above are urgent and necessary stopgaps, they do not in and of themselves provide a long-term solution. Instead, it is essential to recognise that social movements, trade unions, peasant organisations, and other instruments that organise the working people of the continent must unite with all patriotic forces to form a political force capable of harnessing collective human capacity into political power to shape the future of the continent.

Ultimately, the weak, hollowed-out neocolonial administrations in current African states must be replaced with strong, patriotic governments, by and of the people, willing to use all available tools to unite with other parts of Africa and advance the continent towards development for countries and dignity for people. The protagonists of the political project for power and patriotism are the working people. Without them as the motive force for social change, these ideas will remain abstract proposals rather than concrete realities.

The revolutionary Pan-Africanism necessary today means concrete organising to build popular power; strategic analysis, understanding enemies and opportunities for advancement; tactical flexibility to adapt to changing conditions; and absolute commitment to liberation, regardless of obstacles. It means recognising that political and economic kingdoms must be sought simultaneously—that genuine political sovereignty requires economic independence, just as meaningful economic development requires political power to enforce our aspirations from external domination.

Conclusion: Revolutionary Pan-Africanism or Continued Fragmentation

Most fundamentally, African peoples possess the capacity to radically break from the status quo. The hundreds of millions engaged in informal cross-border trade have already achieved

integration despite state obstruction. Women lead community struggles and revolutionary movements. Peasants defend land against corporate seizure. Youth refuse despair and imagine alternatives. The question is not capacity but power: do organised workers, peasants, women, and oppressed communities build sufficient organisational capacity and political clarity to contest ruling class control and build alternatives?

Pan-Africanism confronts a moment of both crisis and opportunity. Crisis because Africa's current trajectory drives toward collapse: debt burdens crush states, climate change devastates vulnerable communities, political instability spreads, and youth face futures of unemployment and frustration. Yet crises create possibilities for transformation. The tasks are enormous: build continent-spanning organisations capable of coordinated action, develop shared political programs uniting diverse struggles, support assertions of sovereignty against inevitable repression, and build political power to contest both external imperialism and its local collaborators.

The path forward runs through Resistance Committees in Sudan, serving the people amid war; through women traders crossing borders despite harassment; through workers coordinating strikes across countries; through peasants defending land against corporate seizure; through youth movements refusing despair; through all those who reject the limitations imposed by the status quo.

Kwame Nkrumah wrote: 'We face neither East nor West; we face forward.' Today, forward means towards economic integration and political sovereignty simultaneously. Towards popular power displacing elite domination, towards Pan-African solidarity transcending artificial borders. This is the only path that leads anywhere worth going. The alternative is continued fragmentation, dependency, and underdevelopment, which serves global capitalism and African comprador classes at the expense of the working people.

Contemporary conditions make international solidarity more necessary, not less. Debt mechanisms, trade agreements, and military interventions all transcend national boundaries. The IMF does not target individual countries at random; it systematically disciplines the Global South. Responses must be equally systematic. When one country defaults on illegitimate debt, it faces punishment; when multiple countries coordinate to reject it, power shifts. Emerging multipolarity creates space for African agency but requires strategic clarity. Peoples' movements and organisations must use geopolitical openings strategically and ensure South-South relations serve popular interests, not elite accumulation.

To reiterate: Africa is a wealthy continent with poor people. This paradox is not natural but structural, produced and maintained by balkanisation that began with colonial partition and continued through neocolonial consolidation. Breaking this pattern requires revolutionary transformation—not merely policy reform but fundamental restructuring of economic, political, and social relations.

This paper has demonstrated several interconnected claims. First, state-led integration fails because post-colonial African states were designed for extraction rather than development, and because comprador classes whose interests align with an imperialist agenda of fragmentation control the state apparatus. Second, ordinary people already achieve significant integration through practice, with informal cross-border trade demonstrating both the possibility of integration and working people's capacity to create solutions when states fail.

Third, the Alliance of Sahel States exemplifies how sovereignty struggles, emerging from popular mobilisation, can advance integration by breaking neocolonial relationships. The AES demonstrates that: breaking French neocolonialism required removing comprador governments; popular mobilisation creates conditions that enable proud assertions of

sovereignty; and economic integration must be grounded in political sovereignty. As Amílcar Cabral taught us: "Political independence without economic independence was an 'empty shell', that a 'truly independent nation cannot allow its objectives and priorities to be distorted or frustrated by the manipulations of powerful foreign investors'" (Cabral, 1979, p. 98).

Fourth, Sudan's revolution demonstrates the popular organisation's capacity whilst revealing that isolated struggles face overwhelming challenges when prevented from transitioning towards claims on political power. Fifth, economic integration is a survival imperative for the entire African continent. The post-2008 debt crisis reveals that current arrangements are unsustainable. African countries cannot simultaneously service debt, invest in development, and meet population needs. Only integration that creates viable economies with bargaining power and competitive, integrated value chains offers a path forward.

Finally, the protagonists of Pan-African integration must be—can only be—organised workers, peasants, informal traders, and all those struggling for economic dignity and political freedom, because these are the constituencies with organised political capacity and material interests aligned with genuine unity and integration, rather than the continued fragmentation that facilitates exploitation.

The political kingdom and economic kingdom aren't separate destinations but aspects of a single transformation: genuine political sovereignty requires economic independence; meaningful economic development requires political freedom from external domination. The protagonists who will push our societies to walk this path are the organised working people of Africa—not through spontaneous uprising but through conscious organisation, strategic clarity, tactical adaptability, and unwavering commitment.

As Amílcar Cabral taught: "Hide nothing from the masses of our people. Tell no lies. Claim no easy victories" (Cabral, 1973). The path ahead is difficult, enemies are powerful, and obstacles are enormous. But the alternative—continued fragmentation, dependency, underdevelopment serving global capitalism—constitutes a denunciation of our dignity. Forward, therefore, towards revolutionary Pan-Africanism, popular power, and continental liberation. Forward to the prosperity and dignity of the African people.

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