Transforming the International Order: Revolutionary Possibilities and Limits of Pan-Africanism

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Abstract

Pan-Africanism's capacity to transform international order emerges through dialectical tensions between revolutionary aspiration and institutional constraint. This paper interrogates three constitutive contradictions shaping the movement from inception to present: liberation versus institutionalisation, continental unity versus state sovereignty, and radical transformation versus accommodation with global capitalism. The analysis demonstrates that Pan-Africanism neither simply succeeds nor fails but operates as contested terrain where opposing forces determine outcomes. Understanding these contradictions proves essential for scholars interpreting Pan-African history and activists advancing contemporary struggles for justice and self-determination.

Keywords: Pan-Africanism, continental integration, revolutionary continuity, anti-colonial resistance, popular mobilisation

Introduction

The question if pan-Africanism can the international order has animated continental politics for over a century (Abrahamsen, 2020). From early congresses convened in London (1900), Paris (1919), and Manchester (1945) to the formation of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU, 1963) and its successor, the African Union (AU, 2002), this political tradition has claimed ambition for reshaping global structures that have long subordinated African peoples (Campbell, 2018). The relationship between revolutionary aspiration and practical achievement remains contested terrain. Magu (2023) credits the movement with dismantling colonial rule and establishing continental institutions. Abegunrin *et al.* (2016) emphasis failure to deliver economic transformation or dislodge hierarchies embedded in global capitalism. In this sense, Pan-Africanism has generated both liberatory possibilities and reproduced patterns of constraint.

This paper examines Pan-Africanism through its internal contradictions. Transformation and limitation emerge together, shaped by tension across historical moments: (i) the relationship between revolutionary mobilisation and institutional consolidation, (ii) continental unity versus state sovereignty, and (iii) radical alternatives versus accommodating with dominant power configuration. Each contradiction has produced distinct political outcomes, opening possibilities for challenging imperial power while constraining the scope of change by embedding Pan-African projects within the systems they sought to dismantle.

The background traces three core tensions shaping Pan-Africanism from inception to present. The literature review shows that scholarship prioritising landmark events and institutional milestones over persistent contradictions. The theoretical framework brings historical materialism into conversation with Pan-African thought, centering contradiction as both generative and limiting. The methodology outlines thematic analysis of secondary literature.

The findings and discussion present four themes illustrating the tensions between revolutionary possibility and institutional constraint across Pan-Africanism. The recommendations offer proposals for future research and policy engagement. The conclusion synthesises the argument and reflects on the implications for understanding Pan-Africanism's role in contemporary international politics.

Background and Context

Pan-Africanism emerged at the intersection of African resistance to racial capitalism and global upheavals of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Clennon, 2016; Adi, 2018). The first Pan-African Conference (1900) brought together intellectuals and activists who framed their struggle in racial and political terms (Sherwood, 2012). These pioneers condemned the Africa's partition and racist ideologies justifying colonial domination, while articulating visions of collective action rooted in shared oppression. This vision carried dual character from the outset, mobilising against empire while seeking recognition within frameworks of international law and liberal humanitarianism constructed by imperial powers (Schneer, 2017).

The Manchester Congress (1945) marked a turning point as African delegates, including Kwame Nkrumah and Jomo Kenyatta, shifted focus from petitioning colonial powers to demanding immediate independence (Ta'a, 2014; Chigozie, 2018). The congress fused anti-colonial nationalism with socialist critiques of imperialism, connecting territorial liberation to economic transformation (Adi, 2012). This moment revealed the first central tension: liberation as radical rupture versus liberation as state power succession (Khisa, 2022).

The 1960s brought independence to most of the continent, raising questions of institutionalisation (Nzongola-Ntalaja, 2014). The Organisation of African Unity (1963) reflected competing visions of Pan-African unity. Leaders such as Nkrumah championed continental government with centralised political and economic authority. He insisted that only unified Africa could resist neocolonial exploitation and challenge the global economy's imbalances (Adogamhe, 2008). Conversely, Nnamdi Azikiwe and Julius Nyerere countered that such projects threatened sovereignty of newly independent states. Their preference regional cooperation meant preserving national control over domestic affairs (Campbell, 2018). The compromise embedded this tension into the OAU Charter, committing to both continental solidarity and non-interference in member states' internal affairs (Opiko, 2013).

Liberation struggles in Southern Africa during the 1960s and 1970s intensified Pan-Africanism's revolutionary character (Gwekwerere, 2020). The OAU Liberation Committee provided material and diplomatic support to movements fighting Portuguese colonialism, Rhodesian settler rule, and apartheid (Mabitsela, 2025). These struggles exposed fault lines: frontline states bore costs of confrontation with white minority regimes, while economic ties with apartheid South Africa or Western powers revealed the contradiction between revolutionary solidarity and national interest (Tarimo & Reuben, 2013).

The debt crisis of the 1980s and imposition of structural adjustment programmes revealed limits of formal independence (Adogamhe, 2008). African states became constrained by external creditors, international financial institutions, and conditionalities attached to

development assistance (Green & Faber, 1994). The Lagos Plan of Action (1980) attempted to chart an alternative path through collective self-reliance, regional integration, and state-led industrialisation (Hersi & Akinola, 2024). By the late 1980s, neoliberal reforms had reshaped African economies, privatising state enterprises, liberalising trade, and reducing government capacity (Mncube, 2025). The language of Pan-African transformation gave way to technocratic governance, market-led development, and donor-driven priorities. The contradiction between radical transformation and reformist accommodation became acute.

In 2002, the AU replaced the OAU, adopting a more interventionist posture by asserting the right to intervene in member states under conditions of genocide, war crimes, and crimes against humanity (Udombana, 2002; Yeshanew, 2012). The AU promoted neoliberal integration through the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), tying continental development to private investment, good governance, and partnership with Western donors (Landsberg, 2012). These shifts reflected accommodation with global capitalism over transformation.

Contemporary Pan-Africanism operates within this layered history. The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), launched in 2021, envisions economic integration through market expansion (Gottschalk, 2022). Yet states resist ceding control over trade policy (Khan, 2025), while civil society groups challenge liberalisation's distributional consequences (Ajibo & Kaime, 2025). Popular movements for land reform, economic justice, and democratic accountability invoke Pan-African language to challenge external domination and internal inequality. These movements recall earlier mass mobilisation that pressed Pan-Africanism beyond boundaries set by state actors and elite institutions, confronting the same tensions structuring the movement since inception: liberation versus institutionalisation, unity versus sovereignty, transformation versus accommodation.

Literature Review

Scholarship on Pan-Africanism has documented intellectual genealogy, political milestones, and institutional development (Rabaka, 2020; Adi, 2018). Much treats the movement's history as progression through distinct phases: early diaspora activism (Inusah, 2025), anti-colonial nationalism (Aniche *et al.*, 2023), postcolonial integration (Ani & Ojakorotu, 2017), and contemporary regionalism (Magu, 2023). However, this periodisation obscures contradictions operating across phases, yielding scholarship that privileges landmarks over processes, achievements over tensions, and formal institutions over social forces (Oloruntoba, 2023).

Early historiography celebrated Pan-Africanism as triumph of African agency against colonial domination. Abegunrin *et al.* (2016) trace the movement's origins to diaspora intellectuals and anti-colonial leaders who articulated unified African identity, highlighting the Pan-African congresses, independence struggles, and formation of the OAU as expressions of African self-determination. This celebratory tradition established Pan-Africanism as central narrative in African political history (Oloruntoba, 2023), but paid less attention to conflicts and compromises shaping these developments. Tensions between revolutionary and reformist factions, between diaspora and continental leadership, and between popular mobilisation and state control received limited analysis (Inusah, 2025).

A second wave of scholarship, influenced by dependency theory and world-systems analysis, shifted attention to structural constraints facing Pan-African projects (Onyango 2025). Nkrumah (1965), Rodney (1972), and Amin (2014) argued political independence did not alter Africa's subordinate position in the global economy, emphasising neocolonial exploitation, unequal exchange, and persistence of imperial control through economic means. This literature grounded Pan-Africanism in material realities of capitalist accumulation, exposing sovereignty's limits for newly independent states remaining dependent on external capital and markets (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013). However, this structural focus risked obscuring African actors' agency and the internal political struggles shaping responses to external constraint, leaving underexplored the dynamic interplay between structure and agency, limitation and possibility.

More recent scholarship has turned to regional integration, security cooperation, and continental governance (Oloruntoba, 2020; Khadiagala, 2017). Studies of the AU, the AfCFTA, and regional economic communities document institutional architecture, policy frameworks, and implementation challenges (Wapmuk, 2021). This literature engages debates about African institutions' effectiveness, continental strategies' coherence, and the relationship between regional and global governance (Aniche, 2020). Yet much of this work adopts a technocratic orientation, treating integration as a problem of institutional design and policy coordination. The political economy of integration, class interests shaping regional projects, and popular forces excluded from or resistant to elite-driven initiatives receive less attention (Bischoff, 2021).

Feminist scholarship has challenged conventional Pan-African historiography's gender blindness (Blain *et al.*, 2016). Women played central roles in anti-colonial movements, liberation struggles, and grassroots organising, yet Pan-African institutions and ideologies marginalised their participation and reproduced patriarchal hierarchies (Tamale, 2020; Mama, 2017). This literature has expanded Pan-African studies' analytical scope by foregrounding gender as constitutive dimension of political struggle (Falola & Yacob-Haliso, 2017; Tsikata & Ossome, 2024).

A smaller body of work examines contradictions and internal tensions within Pan-Africanism. Murithi (2015), Hongoh (2016), and Wapmuk (2021) analyse the gap between Pan-African rhetoric and state practice, particularly tension between continental solidarity and national interest. This scholarship moves beyond celebratory accounts to engage political dynamics producing cooperation and conflict (Onyebuchi Eze, 2013). However, it remains relatively limited in scope (Abegunrin *et al.*, 2016), and theoretical tools for analysing contradiction as generative force remain underdeveloped (Abrahamsen, 2020).

The literature leaves underdeveloped a framework treating contradiction as defining feature of Pan-African politics (Oloruntoba, 2023). The tensions between liberation and institutionalisation, unity and sovereignty, transformation and accommodation generate both possibilities for change and limits on change (Murithi, 2017). These tensions shape Pan-African projects' outcomes in ways that cataloguing successes or failures cannot capture. A

theoretical approach centering contradiction offers more productive understanding of Pan-Africanism's relationship to the international order (Amuhaya *et al.,* 2021).

Theoretical Framework

This paper uses historical materialism in dialogue with Pan-African political thought to examine the relationships between social forces, political structures, and structural change (Lemelle, 1993; Masilela, 1994). This framework centres material conditions shaping political struggle, class interests informing ideological positions, and contradictions driving historical transformation (Sonderegger, 2020). Pan-African thought offers concepts and debates rooted in specific experiences of African peoples confronting colonialism, racial capitalism, and imperial domination (Kumah-Abiwu, 2024).

Central to this framework is the concept of contradiction, referring to the presence of opposing forces or tendencies within a single phenomenon existing in tension with one another (Ackah, 2016). These forces do not simply cancel each other out, but interact in ways producing movement, change, and new configurations of power. Contradictions can be internal to a political movement, such as tension between popular mobilisation and elite leadership (Oladipo, 2019). Contradictions may also arise from the relationship between a movement and structures it seeks to transform, such as the need to engage with state institutions (Onyebuchi, 2013). Contradictions are generative because they open possibilities for change by exposing existing arrangements' instability. They are also limiting because they constrain change by channelling struggle into forms reproducing existing power relations (Kessi *et al.,* 2022).

The first contradiction concerns liberation and institutionalisation (Onyebuchi, 2013). Liberation struggles mobilise popular forces against systems of domination and generate collective consciousness, forge solidarities across communities, and articulate visions of alternative social orders (Ackah, 2016). Institutionalisation, by contrast, involves consolidation of power into stable structures of authority via bureaucratic organisation, hierarchical decision-making, and management of competing interests within defined procedures. Pan-Africanism has oscillated between these poles (Murithi, 2020a). Early congresses and liberation movements emphasised revolutionary transformation, but the formation of the OAU and AU prioritised institutional stability and interstate cooperation (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013). This tension shapes contemporary debates about whether the movement should function as movement for social transformation or framework for continental governance (Murithi, 2020b).

The second contradiction concerns continental unity and state sovereignty (Abrahamsen, 2020). Pan-African discourse has called for African unity as means of resisting external domination and achieving collective self-determination (Hongoh, 2016). Unity implies pooling resources, coordinating policies, and subordinating national interests to continental priorities. State sovereignty centers the authority of individual states to govern their territories without external interference (Martin, 2013) - an achievement won by African states emerging from colonial rule (Obijekwu *et al.,* 2018). States resist ceding control to supranational institutions that might challenge domestic power structures or redistribute resources across borders. This

tension runs through every Pan-African organisation and regional integration initiative (Taye, 2021).

The third contradiction involves radical transformation and reformist accommodation (Delea, 2024). Pan-Africanism has articulated critique of the international order and vision of African self-reliance. This critique has taken different forms including anti-colonial nationalism, socialist internationalism, Third Worldism, and calls for a New International Economic Order (Abegunrin *et al.*, 2016). These challenged global capitalism's hierarchies and called for structural change. Simulatenously, Pan-African projects have operated within existing global institutions and often adopted strategies reinforcing dominant frameworks (Abrahamsen *et al.*, 2023). The shift from the Lagos Plan of Action to structural adjustment, from self-reliance to market-led development, from the OAU to the AU reflects gradual accommodation with neoliberal globalisation (Chima, 2023; Oloruntoba, 2023).

Historical materialism offers concepts for analysing these contradictions. The relationship between base and superstructure centres economic relations structuring production, exchange, and accumulation as base and political institutions, legal systems, ideologies, and cultural forms as superstructure (Khachaturian, 2024). Changes in the base create pressures for transformation in the superstructure, but the superstructure also has relative autonomy and can reinforce or obstruct changes in the base (Chakrabarti, 2022). Applied to Pan-Africanism, this framework directs attention to how economic dependence and global capitalist integration constrain political projects seeking continental autonomy.

Class struggle structures Pan-Africanism as different groups hold divergent interests (Falola & Agbo, 2019). Anti-colonial movements brought together workers, peasants, intellectuals, and emerging national bourgeoisies (Falola & Agbo, 2018; Sonderegger, 2020). After independence, these alliances fragmented as new ruling classes consolidated power through control of the state (Oloruntoba, 2023). These ruling clases pursued accumulation strategies aligning with global capital over popular welfare (Falola & Agbo, 2019). Popular classes responded with demands for land reform, labour rights, and democratic participation (Chipato, 2023).

Hegemony refers to dominant groups' capacity to maintain power through construction of consent (Nunoo & Adu-Boateng, 2022). Hegemonic projects articulate diverse interests into coherent political programme appearing to serve the common good (Edozie, 2017). Pan-Africanism has functioned as hegemonic project, unifying different classes, states, and ideological tendencies under the banner of African solidarity (Shivji, 2018). Yet such unity often emerges through compromises prioritising ruling elites' interests over popular demands (Oloruntoba, 2015). It remains contested by counter-hegemonic projects challenging elite control and seeking to reclaim Pan-Africanism as vehicle for popular liberation.

Pan-African thought enriches this framework by centering specific histories of African peoples and intellectual traditions. Du Bois, Nkrumah, Cabral, Rodney, and Sankara developed analyses of colonialism, neocolonialism, and dependency essential for understanding Africa's place in the international order (Tabi, 2016). These thinkers argued political independence without economic transformation would leave African states vulnerable to continued

exploitation. They called for socialist development, regional cooperation, and popular participation as foundation of liberation (Kalu, 2017), while recognised tensions between nationalist and internationalist commitments, between state-led development and grassroots mobilisation, between revolutionary aspiration and compromises required to govern (Abrahamsen, 2020).

Research Methodology

This study employs qualitative research design using thematic analysis of secondary scholarship. The aim is to trace contradictions shaping Pan-Africanism from inception to present and to identify patterns illuminating the relationship between revolutionary possibility and structural limitation. The methodology proceeds through three stages: source selection, thematic interpretation, and synthesis.

Source selection began with identification of secondary scholarship providing historical context, theoretical insight, and critical interpretation. The literature reviewed includes histories of Pan-Africanism, studies of African political economy, analyses of regional integration, and theoretical works on colonialism, neocolonialism, and dependency. Feminist scholarship on Pan-Africanism was included to foreground gender dynamics and marginalisation of women within the movement and its historiography. Works by African scholars were prioritised to centre African perspectives and intellectual traditions.

Thematic interpretation involved close reading of sources to identify recurring tensions, patterns of conflict, and moments of transformation. The analysis focused on four themes derived from the theoretical framework: (i) liberation and institutionalisation, (ii) continental unity and state sovereignty, (iii) radical transformation and reformist accommodation, and (iv) popular mobilisation and elite control. Each theme was explored through multiple cases and historical moments.

Synthesis brought findings from thematic interpretation to construct an overarching argument about the relationship between contradiction, transformation, and limitation in Pan-African politics. The synthesis does not resolve the contradictions identified, but treats them as constitutive features of Pan-Africanism shaping possibilities and constraints.

Three limitations should be noted in this methodology. First, the study relies on published secondary sources, not primary archival research or interviews, limiting access to internal debates, informal networks, and grassroots perspectives not appearing in official documents or scholarly accounts. Second, the selection of sources reflects prominence of certain voices and organisations within Pan-African discourse. Perspectives of marginalised actors, particularly women, rural communities, and non-elite actors, are underrepresented in the used secondary sources. Third, the thematic approach risks imposing interpretive categories that do not fully capture complexity of individual cases.

Findings and Discussion

The analysis reveals four interconnected themes illuminating the contradictions shaping Pan-Africanism. Each theme demonstrates the tension between revolutionary possibility and

structural limitation. Together, they provide framework for understanding how Pan-Africanism has challenged and reproduced the international order.

Liberation Struggles and Institutional Capture

Liberation struggles generated revolutionary consciousness and mobilised popular forces against colonial domination. The anti-colonial movements of the mid-twentieth century brought together diverse classes and communities under the banner of national independence, articulating visions of self-determination, economic justice, and cultural renewal beyond the goal of transferring state power. Frantz Fanon's writings on decolonisation captured this revolutionary potential, arguing liberation required not only political independence but transformation of social relations, eradication of colonial mentalities, and creation of new forms of collective life. Similarly, Amilcar Cabral emphasised that national liberation struggles must connect political emancipation to economic and cultural transformation. These thinkers understood liberation as process extending beyond the moment of independence.

However, independence initiated processes of institutionalisation that channelled revolutionary energy into state structures. The new ruling classes emerging from liberation movements consolidated power through state institutions, security apparatus, and control over resources. They pursued development strategies prioritising capital accumulation over popular welfare. The state became the primary site of accumulation for the emerging bourgeoisie, who lacked independent economic bases. This process – generating what scholars term bureaucratic bourgeoisie or comprador class - reproduced patterns of dependency and inequality.

The formation of the OAU reflected this tension between liberation and institutionalisation at the continental level. The organisation committed to supporting liberation struggles in Southern Africa and opposing neocolonialism, establishing the Liberation Committee to provide material and diplomatic support to movements fighting Portuguese colonialism, Rhodesian settler rule, and apartheid. However, the OAU also enshrined principles of non-interference and respect for sovereignty that protected ruling elites from external scrutiny. The organisation could not intervene in member states to address human rights violations, authoritarian rule, or economic exploitation.

The transition from the OAU to the African Union marked shift in the relationship between liberation and institutionalisation. The AU adopted more interventionist posture, asserting the right to intervene in cases of genocide, war crimes, and crimes against humanity. It established mechanisms for peer review, conflict resolution, and peacekeeping. These changes responded to criticisms the OAU failed to address state collapse, civil wars, and mass atrocities. They also reflected the influence of liberal internationalism and post-Cold War emphasis on human rights, good governance, and the responsibility to protect. Yet the AU's interventionist turn did not resolve the contradiction between popular liberation and elite control. It merely reconfigured the terms by expanding continental institutions' authority to manage conflicts threatening regional stability or offending international norms.

The capture of liberation struggles by ruling elites has produced recurring cycles of mobilisation and demobilisation. Popular movements mobilising for independence were

marginalised after power transfer. New movements emerged to contest authoritarian rule, economic exploitation, and social inequality, invoking Pan-African rhetoric to legitimise demands and connect local struggles to broader continental projects. This dynamic continues in contemporary Pan-African politics, where grassroots movements for land reform, economic justice, and democratic accountability confront states and regional organisations prioritising stability, investor confidence, and elite interests.

Continental Unity and Sovereignty Tensions

The pursuit of continental unity has been central to Pan-African discourse since the early congresses, framed as necessary for resisting external domination, pooling resources, and achieving collective self-determination. The vision of unified Africa has taken different forms, from political federation with centralised authority to economic integration through common markets and infrastructure development. Each version reflects different assumptions about the relationship between unity and sovereignty.

The debates at the founding of the OAU crystallised these tensions. Nkrumah argued that only continental government with supranational authority could protect African states from neocolonial exploitation, proposing unified military command, common currency, and centralised economic planning. His vision of unity required states to cede sovereignty to higher authority capable of coordinating continental development. This position faced strong opposition as leaders of newly independent states were unwilling to surrender sovereignty they had just won. They contended that each nation held the right to determine its own path and that premature integration would reproduce colonial hierarchies under new guise. The compromise produced an organisation committed to unity in principle but organised around protection of sovereignty in practice.

Regional economic communities (RECs) sought to promote integration through trade liberalisation, customs unions, and freedom of movement, yet progress has been limited by states' reluctance to harmonise policies, reduce tariffs, or accept standardised regulations. Each state calculates its interests in relation to regional arrangements and resists measures threatening domestic industries, government revenues, or political control. The result is a patchwork of overlapping memberships, competing priorities, and weak implementation.

The AfCFTA represents the most ambitious attempt to resolve this tension through market-based integration, envisioning single continental market eliminating tariffs, harmonising trade rules, and facilitating movement of goods and services. Proponents argue that economic integration will spur industrialisation, create employment, and enhance Africa's bargaining power in global trade negotiations. Critics point to distributional consequences of liberalisation, risks of deindustrialisation in less competitive economies, and absence of mechanisms addressing existing inequalities between African states. The AfCFTA reproduces the contradiction between unity and sovereignty by promoting integration through market structures that leave questions of power and inequality unresolved.

The principle of non-interference has been progressively eroded through interventions justified by mass atrocities, unconstitutional changes of government, and threats to regional stability.

This shift reflects recognition that sovereignty cannot be absolute when states fail to protect their populations or pose dangers to neighbours. It also reflects the influence of liberal internationalism and alignment of African institutions with global norms around human rights and governance. Although, the erosion of non-interference has not resolved the tension between unity and sovereignty. Rather, it has created new contestation over who decides when intervention is legitimate, whose interests are served by such decisions, and whether external actors can invoke continental norms to justify their own interventions.

Anti-Imperial Resistance and Global Accommodation

Pan-Africanism emerged as critique of imperialism and vision of alternative global orders. The early congresses condemned colonial partition, racial oppression, and economic exploitation. Post-independence leaders articulated demands for economic sovereignty, South-South cooperation, and a New International Economic Order. These demands challenged global capitalism's hierarchies and called for structural transformation, drawing on anti-colonial nationalism, socialist internationalism, and Third World solidarity to imagine a world organised on principles of equality, self-determination, and mutual respect.

The Lagos Plan of Action represented the high point of Pan-African aspirations for self-reliance and autonomous development, calling for regional integration, collective self-reliance, and state-led industrialisation. The plan rejected dependency on external markets and capital, proposing to build intra-African trade, develop indigenous industries, and prioritise food security and rural development. It reflected the influence of dependency theory and conviction African development required delinking from exploitative global structures.

The Lagos Plan failed to materialise because of the debt crisis and imposition of structural adjustment programmes by the International Monetary Fund and World Bank. These programmes reshaped African political economies, requiring states to reduce government spending, privatise state enterprises, liberalise trade, and open markets to foreign investment. Such policies dismantled state-led development frameworks constructed after independence, deepening poverty, unemployment, and inequality. They also accelerated Africa's integration into global capitalism on terms dictated by external creditors and international financial institutions.

The shift from the Lagos Plan to structural adjustment marked decisive accommodation with neoliberal globalisation. African states, weakened by debt and economic crisis, lacked capacity to resist external pressure. International institutions wielded conditionality as tool to enforce compliance. The language of Pan-African transformation gave way to technocratic governance, market-led development, and donor-driven priorities. NEPAD, adopted by the AU, embodied this accommodation, framing African development as dependent on private investment, good governance, and partnership with Western donors. NEPAD accepted the neoliberal consensus that markets should drive economic growth, prioritising investor confidence over popular welfare.

The accommodation with global capitalism has not erased the aspiration for transformation. African states continue to invoke Pan-African rhetoric when demanding reform of international

institutions, calling for debt relief, or resisting trade agreements threatening domestic industries. They form alliances with other developing regions through forums such as the Group of 77, the BRICS, and South-South cooperation initiatives. However, such efforts have achieved limited success in altering the rules of the global economy. African states remain marginal in decision-making forums such as the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the World Trade Organisation. They continue to depend on export of primary commodities, external finance, and technology transfers from more industrialised economies. The experience of Pan-Africanism suggests that accommodation and resistance are not mutually exclusive strategies but opposing tendencies coexisting in tension.

Popular Mobilisation and Elite Appropriation

Popular mobilisation has been the lifeblood of Pan-Africanism. Mass movements for independence, land reform, labour rights, and democratic participation have driven the most transformative moments in African politics, bringing workers, peasants, students, and the urban poor to challenge colonial domination, authoritarian rule, and economic exploitation. Such movements articulated visions of Pan-African solidarity rooted in shared struggles against oppression, connecting local grievances to continental projects and demanding accountability from national and regional institutions.

The post-independence period saw demobilisation of movements that had fought for liberation. Ruling parties transformed from vehicles of popular struggle into instruments of state control. Governing elites banned opposition parties, restricted independent organising, and repressed dissent. Trade unions came under state control, peasant movements were incorporated into ruling party structures, while student activism faced surveillance and violence.

New waves of mobilisation emerged in response to authoritarian rule and economic crisis. The 1980s and 1990s witnessed democratic movements challenging one-party states and military regimes, invoking Pan-African language to connect their demands to broader struggles for justice and equality. They called for constitutional reforms, multi-party elections, and protection of civil liberties, achieving varying degrees of success. Movements were either forced transitions to competitive electoral politics, repressed or co-opted. Even where transitions occur, they frequently produced limited democratisation leaving underlying structures of power intact.

Contemporary popular movements continue to draw on Pan-African traditions. Movements for land reform challenge dispossession of communities by states, corporations, and foreign investors. Labour movements contest precarious employment, wage stagnation, and erosion of worker protections. Feminist movements demand gender equality, reproductive rights, and an end to violence against women. Youth movements mobilise against unemployment, police brutality, and exclusion from political decision-making. These movements invoke Pan-African solidarity to legitimise demands and build alliances across borders.

The relationship between popular mobilisation and continental institutions remains fraught. The African Union and regional organisations have created spaces for civil society participation, yet these spaces are carefully managed. Civil society representatives are invited

to forums where they can provide input on policy frameworks, but remained excluded from decision-making processes controlled by states. The language of participation and inclusion masks continued dominance of state actors and marginalisation of popular voices. Elite appropriation of Pan-Africanism operates through this dynamic of selective incorporation and structural exclusion.

The contradiction between popular mobilisation and elite control generates recurring cycles of struggle. Popular movements press for transformation extending beyond boundaries set by states and institutions. Elites respond by co-opting movement demands, incorporating leaders into ruling structures, or repressing activism threatening their interests. Periods of intensified popular mobilisation have pushed Pan-African projects in more radical directions. Periods of elite consolidation have channelled Pan-Africanism into forms reproducing existing hierarchies. The contemporary moment reflects this tension: grassroots movements invoke Pan-African language to challenge neoliberal integration and demand economic justice, while states and regional organisations promote market-led development and security cooperation serving elite interests.

Recommendations

The analysis presented suggests recommendations for future research and policy engagement, organised around four approaches responding to the contradictions identified in the findings and discussion.

First, scholarship on Pan-Africanism should examine contradictions as both drivers and constraints of historical development. Future research must move beyond linear narratives treating Pan-Africanism as succession of achievements or catalogue of failures. This requires attention to material conditions producing these contradictions, class forces shaping their resolution, and outcomes reflecting both change and continuity. Comparative studies examining Pan-Africanism alongside other regional projects could identify patterns and specificities advancing theoretical understanding.

Second, research should identify conditions enabling revolutionary possibilities to surpass institutional barriers. Scholars must examine moments when popular mobilisation has pushed Pan-African projects beyond limits imposed by elite control. Case studies of liberation struggles, democratic movements, and grassroots organising can reveal the strategies, alliances, and political contexts facilitating transformation. Research should also explore international dimensions of popular mobilisation, including transnational networks, diaspora solidarity, and South-South cooperation operating outside state-controlled channels.

Third, scholarship and policy discourse must foreground popular mobilisation as foundation of renewed Pan-African politics. The capture of Pan-African institutions by ruling elites has limited the movement's capacity to deliver economic transformation and social justice. Reclaiming Pan-Africanism as vehicle for popular liberation depends on building organisations, networks, and alliances operating independently of state control. This does not mean abandoning engagement with state and regional institutions. Policy interventions should support grassroots organising, protect spaces for independent activism, and create mechanisms

enabling popular participation extending beyond consultative forums. Continental institutions should be held accountable to popular movements through mechanisms enabling scrutiny, contestation, and redress.

Fourth, new organisational strategies must transcend limitations of earlier phases. The tensions between sovereignty and unity, institutionalisation and mobilisation, and accommodation and transformation cannot be resolved through incremental reforms. They require reimagining the organisational forms through which Pan-Africanism operates. This might involve strengthening regional economic communities as sites of integration balancing collective action with subsidiarity, creating continental institutions with democratic accountability mechanisms reducing elite capture or building transnational movements connecting struggles across borders and challenging national and global hierarchies. Experimentation with different forms is necessary to discover which configurations can sustain popular power and advance transformation.

National governments must develop industrial policies prioritising domestic manufacturing, technology development, and employment creation. Regional cooperation should extend beyond trade liberalisation to include coordination of industrial policy, joint infrastructure development, and collective bargaining with external actors. Regional economic communities should prioritise equitable integration addressing existing inequalities between member states. The AfCFTA and RECs must include mechanisms for redistribution, compensation for adjustment costs, and support for less developed economies. The AU should strengthen its capacity to respond to mass atrocities and economic crises without reproducing neocolonial patterns of intervention. The AU should expand its engagement with popular movements by creating forums for dialogue, supporting grassroots organising, and incorporating movement demands into policy frameworks.

These recommendations recognise that transformation depends on political struggle, not technical solutions. They require shifts in the balance of power between classes, between states and popular movements, and between Africa and the structures of global capitalism. Scholarship and policy engagement should contribute to these struggles by producing knowledge serving popular interests, exposing mechanisms of elite control, and supporting organisational capacity of movements fighting for justice and equality.

Conclusion

This paper has examined Pan-Africanism through the lens of contradiction, arguing that the movement's relationship to international transformation cannot be understood by cataloguing achievements or failures. Transformation and limitation emerge together, shaped by tensions operating across historical moments and domains of political activity: the relationship between liberation and institutionalisation, continental unity versus preserving state sovereignty, radical alternatives versus accommodation with global structures, and mobilisation of popular forces versus their appropriation by ruling elites.

The analysis demonstrates that Pan-Africanism has generated revolutionary possibilities through anti-colonial resistance, visions of alternative orders, and mass mobilisation for justice

and self-determination. Pan-Africanism has reproduced structural limitations through elite capture of institutions, alignment with neoliberal globalisation, and prioritisation of state interests over popular welfare. These opposing tendencies do not cancel each other out. They exist in tension, producing outcomes reflecting change and continuity.

Popular mobilisation has persisted as force for renewal. Contemporary movements for land reform, economic justice, and democratic participation invoke Pan-African language to challenge external domination and internal hierarchies, recalling earlier moments when mass struggle pushed Pan-Africanism beyond boundaries set by elite actors. They confront the same contradictions structuring the movement since inception and their capacity to advance transformation depends on their ability to build organisations sustaining popular power, forge alliances across borders, and contest the capture of Pan-African institutions by ruling elites.

The question posed at the outset was whether Pan-Africanism can transform the international order. The answer is that transformation and reproduction operate simultaneously. Pan-Africanism has challenged imperial domination, reshaped global norms around decolonisation and sovereignty, and inspired movements for justice across the world. Pan-Africanism also accommodated to existing global hierarchies, reproduced patterns of dependency, and served ruling classes' interests. The balance of social forces determines the movement's future trajectory, the outcomes of political struggles, and the capacity of popular movements to reclaim Pan-Africanism as vehicle for liberation over elite consolidation.

Analysis attentive to contradictions reveals that Pan-Africanism is neither story of progress nor record of failure. It is a site of ongoing contestation between opposing forces generating both possibilities and constraints. Understanding this tension is necessary for scholars seeking to interpret Pan-African history and for activists seeking to advance contemporary struggles. The contradictions within Pan-Africanism are not problems to be solved but the terrain on which political struggle unfolds. Their resolution depends not on technical reforms or institutional design but on the capacity of popular movements to shift the balance of power in favour of transformation over reproduction, liberation over capture, and collective self-determination over elite control.

Pan-Africanism’s enduring relevance lies not in institutional achievements or ideological coherence but in its capacity to articulate visions of solidarity connecting struggles across borders, generations, and domains of oppression. The material conditions of global capitalism have constrained that vision, as have ruling classes' interests and structures of state power. This vision inspired resistance, mobilised popular forces, and opened possibilities for alternative futures. The question is not whether Pan-Africanism has succeeded or failed but how the contradictions defining Pan-Africanism will be negotiated in the struggles to come.

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