# The African Union: Building Continental Power

*AiCE Africanism & Pan-African Studies — From OAU to AU*

## From OAU to AU: Evolution of an Idea

The Organisation of African Unity (OAU), founded in Addis Ababa in May 1963, was the institutional expression of the Pan-African vision — the first attempt to create a continental political framework for the fifty-odd states that had emerged from colonialism. But from its inception, it was a compromise that fell far short of what Nkrumah had demanded. Rather than a federal union with a single government and a common foreign policy, the OAU was a club of sovereign states whose founding charter explicitly prohibited interference in members' internal affairs.

This non-interference principle — which sounded like a defence of African sovereignty against external meddling — became in practice a shield for African dictators. The OAU watched Idi Amin's reign of terror in Uganda, Bokassa's rule in the Central African Republic, Mobutu's decades of kleptocracy in the Congo, and the Rwandan genocide, and did effectively nothing. The principle designed to protect African states from external intervention protected the worst African governments from African accountability.

By the late 1990s, the OAU's inadequacy was beyond debate. It was Muammar Gaddafi of Libya who most forcefully pushed for its transformation. The Constitutive Act of the African Union, adopted in 2000 and entering into force in 2001, replaced the OAU with the African Union, which formally came into being in July 2002.

## What Makes the AU Different From the OAU

The African Union represented a genuine, if limited, advance over the OAU. Most importantly, it replaced the OAU's absolute non-interference principle with a more nuanced framework that permits, in principle, African intervention in member states in cases of genocide, crimes against humanity, and grave threats to human security — an explicit and significant departure from its predecessor.

| AU Institution | Function and Significance |
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| The Assembly | Supreme decision-making body — heads of state and government of all 55 member states; meets twice yearly. |
| The Commission | The AU's executive body, comparable to the European Commission — manages day-to-day affairs and represents the AU internationally. |
| The Pan-African Parliament | Established 2004 — an advisory legislative body intended eventually to become a fully elected continental parliament. |
| The African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights | A continental human rights court hearing cases on violations of the African Charter. |
| The Peace and Security Council | Coordinates African peacekeeping; authorised to intervene in cases of genocide, war crimes, and unconstitutional changes of government. |
| NEPAD | The AU's economic development framework, focused on infrastructure, agriculture, health, education, and governance. |
| AfCFTA | Launched 2021 — the world's largest free trade area by number of countries; potentially the most transformative economic initiative in African history. |
| Agenda 2063 | The AU's 50-year strategic framework, 'The Africa We Want,' setting goals for integration, development, peace, and cultural renaissance. |

## The African Continental Free Trade Area

The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), which came into force on 1 January 2021, is the most ambitious economic integration project in African history. By creating a single market across 54 African countries with a combined GDP of approximately $3.4 trillion and a population of 1.4 billion people, it has the potential to fundamentally change the economic logic that has kept African countries dependent on exporting raw materials to foreign markets.

The case for the AfCFTA is compelling. Intra-African trade — trade between African countries — accounts for only about 15% of Africa's total trade, compared to 60-70% for Europe and Asia. This extraordinarily low level is not natural — it is the direct result of colonial trade patterns that oriented African economies toward the metropole rather than toward each other. African producers export cocoa to Belgium and import Belgian chocolate rather than selling cocoa to Ghanaian and Nigerian chocolatiers. The World Bank estimates the AfCFTA could lift 30 million Africans out of extreme poverty and increase income for 68 million more by 2035.

| AfCFTA: Key Facts and Potential |
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| Operational from 1 January 2021; signed by 54 of 55 AU member states. |
| Combined GDP approximately $3.4 trillion — the world's largest free trade area by number of participating countries. |
| Combined population: 1.4 billion people. |
| Primary goal: eliminate tariffs on 90% of goods traded between member states; liberalise trade in services. |
| Current intra-African trade: approximately 15% of total — target is to double it by 2035. |
| World Bank projection: could lift 30 million Africans out of extreme poverty by 2035. |
| The AfCFTA Secretariat is based in Accra, Ghana — a symbolic choice honouring Nkrumah's vision. |

## The Challenges of AU Effectiveness

The AU has real achievements: peacekeeping operations in Somalia, Burundi, and the Central African Republic; the African Peer Review Mechanism; the Constitutive Act's formal commitment to democracy and human rights; and the AfCFTA. But it also has serious and persistent weaknesses. Every ambitious AU initiative — from a common currency to a continental defence force — requires member states to accept limitations on their sovereign decision-making, and many resist these limitations, especially larger states with more to lose from pooled sovereignty.

The AU is also chronically underfunded, depending on external donors — the EU, the US, and China — for approximately forty percent of its budget. This dependency creates exactly the kind of vulnerability Nkrumah warned about: an institution designed to build African sovereignty that depends on the goodwill of non-African powers to function. The 2016 Kigali Financing Decision proposed a 0.2% import levy on goods entering Africa to finance the AU independently — a mechanism for genuine African financial self-sufficiency whose full implementation remains incomplete.

## Key Takeaways

The African Union represents a genuine, if limited, advance over the OAU's shield-for-dictators non-interference principle, and its most ambitious project — the AfCFTA — has real potential to transform intra-African trade from fifteen percent to a figure approaching global norms. But the AU remains chronically underfunded and dependent on external donors, creating exactly the vulnerability its founding was meant to overcome. The next lesson examines the newer powers now competing for influence in Africa, and whether they represent genuine partnership or a new form of dependency.