Which Way for Africans in the United States? The Seventh Pan African Congress and Beyond

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This essay attempts to analyse the role and organisation of the North American delegation at the Seventh Pan African Congress held in Kampala, Uganda, from April 3-8, 1994 within the context of current political movements in the United States. Particular attention will be paid to more recent events taking place in the United States, such as the Million Man March, to elucidate the current crisis in African-American leadership. I will argue that this crisis has very real implications with regard to fostering solidarity and redefining a Pan Africanism that is shaped by the needs and aspirations of the producers who make up the overwhelming majority of the African diaspora and the continent.

Since the Congress in 1994, there has been very little written or discussed about particular delegations representing various countries and or regions throughout the Pan African world. Emphasis has been placed on the broad objectives of the Congress as reflected in the Kampala Declaration published by the Seventh PAC secretariat.[1] In order to better prepare for future congresses, develop qualitatively stronger resolutions that embody components for action with hopes of having greater success on the ground, and stay informed about the concrete realities experienced by Africans around the world, it is imperative that local struggles, contradictions and aspirations be articulated by representative organisations, coalitions and communities concerned about and committed to African emancipation and the advancement of humanity. The Pan African movement cannot afford to gloss over specific contradictions in an attempt to simplify the complex links that bind, in order to romanticise and create illusions of solidarity with forces deceptively antithetical to the aspirations of working peoples of the African world.

The Call for a Seventh PAC

The Seventh Pan African Congress was originally scheduled to be convened in mid 1993. After a series of changes the Congress was later set for December of that year. This date was then pushed up to April of 1994, due to logistical constraints and the real possibility of having very few Caribbean participants due to the difficulty of funding and organising delegates in that region. In addition, remembering the Sixth Pan African Congress 20 years before and the barring of Caribbean progressives (by the neo-colonial/liberal African petty-bourgeois leadership who hijacked the Congress), the International Preparatory Committee (IPC) of the Seventh Pan African Congress wanted to insure that Pan Africanists from the Caribbean and South America played an integral role in the development of the Congress. More importantly, time was still needed with regard to the organisation of the Congress as a whole and the coordination of other delegations as well.

Nonetheless, the general call was made by the IPC and newsletters were circulated internationally, boldly proclaiming: "Don't Agonise, Organise-Resist Recolonisation-Come One, Come All." The newsletters served the dual purpose of highlighting current crisis and contradictions in Africa, while at the same time informing potential delegates of the agenda set for the Congress.[2] Fundamental to the general call was the commitment made by the IPC to provide airfare and lodging for at least two participants (providing that at least one be a woman) from every country in Africa. Comparable tickets were also reserved for delegates (who could not afford to attend) travelling from the Caribbean, North and South America and Europe. From the beginning, the IPC made it clear that particular emphasis would be made to insure that women and "grassroots" activists play a critical role in the Congress and be fairly represented. To assist in mobilising participants, IPC representatives were also encouraged to organise fund- raisers and pre-Congresses in their respective countries to democratically insure broad base representation from around the world. Against this backdrop the stage was set for talks "of a new agenda, new task and indeed of a renewed African revolution."

Convening in Kampala

The North American delegation represented a significant cross-section of journalists, teachers, students, community organisers, artists and factory workers, who were all activists in one sense or another. A small cohort had come from Canada, while the bulk of the delegation represented the United States. Delegates were members of organisations such as the National Organising Committee, the Patrice Lumumba Coalition, the December 12th Movement, the Nation Of Islam, the All African People's Revolutionary Party and the National Union for the

Homeless. Once we arrived in Kampala, many were meeting each other for the first time. Unfortunately, the North American delegation did not meet in the USA as a collective prior to coming to the Congress hence, logistical and ideological concerns that took center stage during our "pre-Congress caucus," hindered our delegation's ability (as a collective) to make a valuable contribution with regard to renewing the Pan African movement in the United States and linking "our struggle" with forces seeking to roll back neo-colonial military dictatorships; demanding the centrality of the "women's question," creating alternatives to IMF/World Bank programmes such as Structural Adjustment; breaking down the artificial borders that physically divide Africa and democratise skills, knowledge and information so that they serve to transform the material reality of African peasants and workers.[3] Despite the individual efforts made by certain members of the delegation, there were no significant links made by our group as a whole. Currently, we can see this fragmentation reflected in the fact that since the Seventh PAC our delegation has not met or sponsored a national congress to discuss any of the issues, concerns and resolutions put forth during the Congress. Moreover, dialogue between delegates living in Canada and the United States has been relatively scant if any at all.

Given the contradictions emanating from the preceding Sixth Pan African Congress convened in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, in 1974, the acute economic, political and social crisis in Africa, the globalization of capital and the renewed and reconfigured forms of racist oppression sweeping the Americas and Europe, it was a "minor miracle" that the Seventh PAC actually occurred. Most of us were simply happy to be there. Returning home to "Mother Africa" was an experience in itself; however beyond the euphoria "of our pilgrimage back," there was serious work that needed to be done.

Prior to the actual Congress, each delegation caucused in an effort to elect representatives from their respective groups and prepare a coherent statement reflecting the conditions and aspirations of the constituencies (assuming they had one) for which they represented.

We elected William Watkins, Professor of Education at the University of Utah, as the general representative for the group and Leona Smith, President of the National Union of the Homeless, to sit on the Congress Presidium.[4]

During the election process, several voices spoke out with concern that the actual meeting was being controlled by National Organising Committee member Abdul Alkalimat. However, one voice resonated louder than others. Kwame Toure (aka Stokely Carmichael), Central Committee representative for the All African Peoples Revolutionary Party (AAPRP), directed his question to Alkalimat and asked very plainly "since when did you become a Pan Africanist - who made you the leader of this delegation." Interestingly enough, Toure should have known more about this than others because he along with Alkalimat were

members of the IPC. In addition, Toure had attended the international meeting on global change in Tripoli, Libya, in 1990, where the original resolution was passed for the convening of a Seventh Pan African Congress.[5]

Unlike Alkalimat, Toure and the All African People's Revolutionary Party had chosen at the last minute to endorse the Congress after it was assured that the meeting would take place. During the initial planning of the Congress, Toure (and some members of the AAPRP) had chosen to not be involved due to ideological differences with the members of the London based African Research Information Bureau (ARIB), the principal organisers of the Congress. It became clear that Toure's objection to Alkalimat was much larger than the concern raised. Responding to the exchanges between Toure and Alkalimat, several young people from Canada and the United States objected to what evolved into a "personal squabble" involving two long time activists in the African liberation movement. Toure himself stated that his ideological differences went back twenty years with Abdul Alkalimat.

Nonetheless, Abdul Alkalimat, long time activist/scholar in the African Liberation movement in the US, had been identified by the IPC to organise delegates from the US. It was reasoned that Alkalimat's work with the African Liberation Support Committee, international linkages with the Black left and connections with grassroots movements in the United States placed him in a strategic position to organise the United States side of the North American delegation. Accepting the task, he unilaterally selected delegates from the four directional regions of the US based on the broad criteria set forth by the IPC which emphasised grassroots participation and the equal representation of women. Thus, a significant number of delegates from the United States were hand picked by Alkalimat based on their grassroots orientation and Pan African sentiments. Alkalimat had a tough task, and it was for this reason that others should have been involved in the organising process in the United States. When Kwame Toure raised his criticisms, much of what he had to say resonated with other members of the delegation. The Patrice Lumumba Coalition and the December 12th Movement were Pan African organisations that had worked tirelessly organising mainly in New York and Los Angeles for Pan African causes; however, none of their members had been contacted by Alkalimat or the IPC to do work in preparation for the Congress. Alkalimat was the point man in the United States, yet outside of those whom he had been in direct contact, few knew of his involvement with the Congress until they arrived in Kampala on April 3. In actual fact, many of the delegates who arrived from New York City had mainly come by way of the Ugandan Ambassador to the United Nations and not the IPC.

The lack of communication and preparation prior to the Congress forced the North American delegation to be preoccupied with issues such as "who is a Pan Africanist." This issue was tied to the other question which was being raised at

the conference as to "Who is an African?" Had a pre-Congress or preliminary national meeting been held in the United States, questions of this sort could have been resolved (or at least systematically examined in a democratic manner) prior to our meeting in Kampala. More importantly, the seminal question posed by Walter Rodney in his essay "Towards The Sixth Pan- African Congress: Aspects Of The International Class Struggle In Africa," with regard to "which class" should lead the Pan Africanist movement would have illuminated a great deal, particularly with respect to the trajectory of the movement within the context of the globalisation of capital and the ever widening economic gap between the North and the South. Moreover, honing in on the centrality of ***class*** would have clarified why the IPC placed a premium on the participation of grassroots activists and women given the "pitfalls of national consciousness" and the growth of national bourgeoisies, both on the continent and throughout the diaspora.

The eminent Guyanese Pan Africanist Eusi Kwayana has defined Pan Africanism as "a body of thought and action shared but not uniform or dogmatic; flowing from individual groups, masses of people and occasionally from governments tending to the restoration of freedom and dignity for Africans at home and abroad. It has grown to be the principle means by which Africans seek unity and express a common purpose and determine to achieve their goals. It is dynamic and not stagnant. It has the ability of transforming itself and accumulating new Pan Africanist ideological perspective in the light of experience."[6] What is important about Kwayana's definition is that it highlights the dynamism of Pan Africanism and underscores the importance of examining the process by which we define and redefine Pan Africanism for the 21st century.

There had not been a Pan African Congress in 20 years. Many in our delegation were preoccupied with trying to resurrect old Pan Africanist sentiments that had run their historical course. To tell Leona Smith, a former homeless person, who was representing a constituency of people who are marginal in their own communities that her work was not Pan African was inexcusable. Ms. Smith came to the Seventh Pan African Congress with a sense of purpose, commitment and conviction about the conditions of poor people in the United States. However, as a delegation we learned very little from her because the space was not created for healthy dialogue and discussion. No one ever asked what role can homeless people play in the Pan African movement? Surely there must be one. If there is not then we need to give it all up now. It was also important that African youths be exposed to the organisation of the oppressed in the USA. Daily bombarded by the cultural symbols of affluence in both the print and electronic media, these youths needed concrete contacts with those who reflected a different reality from that presented by CNN or *Ebony* magazine.

A real opportunity was missed at the meeting because of the strong personal positions taken, so that the whole time, the question of the leadership of the

delegation was an issue. It was therefore not possible for a serious discussion to take place on the relationship between the USA and the crisis in Rwanda or Somalia. In fact, the links that the Nation of Islam had forged with particular governments in Africa were never discussed in the open. The absence of this discussion was to become even more important back in the USA when the Nation of Islam claimed the political and ideological leadership of the black liberation movement.

Pan Africanism is a process. It is not a closed book of labels and high flown ideals that have no visible connection with what's taking place on the ground. Social historians of Africa and the diaspora tell us that Pan Africanism is taking place right in front of our eyes, however many of us do not see it because we don't know where to look. Nonetheless it is there, among the people, living, perculating, waiting to explode.

Pan Africanism in the United States

The Seventh Pan African Congress was simultaneously an attempt to organisationally jump start a new Pan African movement and redefine the direction of Pan Africanism in the 21st century. This was exciting for many of us in the North American delegation. Given the crisis in African leadership in the United States and the broader domestic issues impacting Africans and other people of color, the Seventh PAC was a breath of fresh air. Many of us came out of a sense of urgency in an effort to "reconnect" with progressive movements engaged in revolutionary (a word that many of us fail to invoke these days) activity around the world.[7] Indeed, we recognised that as a result of the cold war, the right wing dominance of Reagan and Thatcher during the 1980's, the collapse of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and the consolidation of neo-colonialism in Africa, that organisationally Pan Africanism as a movement had waned. We had no illusions about this. However, if we were to advance the political struggle and move beyond the bourgeois orientation of much of "Black leadership" in the United States, then we had to be about the awesome responsibility of aligning progressive grassroots (in the broad sense of the word) movements and organisations with others around the diaspora and the continent. After all, who had been responsible for our achievements thus far?

More recently, the issue of "Black leadership" and the direction of Africans in the United States (during an election year and the onslaught of right wing politics) have been hotly debated in the US media following the Million Man March convened on October 16, 1995. Originally conceived by Louis Farrakhan, leader of the Nation of Islam, and organised by a broad base coalition led by former NAACP executive director Ben Chavis, the Million Man March simultaneously underscored the poverty of Black leadership, and the desperation and eagerness

of Black people to find meaning and prescriptions for reversing the social, political and economic crisis confronting us today.

It was the internal pain, sense of spiritual deprivation and existential confrontations (that Bob Marley so brilliantly articulated in his song "No Woman No Cry") with Black suffering that allowed Farrakhan to make the call and resonate with ordinary Black folks working nine to five jobs, living cheque to cheque, attempting to create healthy and harmonious environments which foster community and collective action. However, as Robin D. G.. Kelley has stated, the central theme of the March was that Black people needed to take "personal responsibility" for their conditions, thus letting the US government and big business "off the hook."[8] The March did not "fully address the structures of power which perpetuate Black oppression."

Moreover, the March's insistence on "atonement" bought into what Patricia J. Williams characterized as the "stereo typification of criminality and deviance as exclusively a black male thing."[9] African-American men essentially repented to the entire world, asking to be forgiven for their "sins." As someone who attended the March, I began to wonder who was the real culprit, the system or us? The most obvious contradiction with regard to the March was the issue of gender. The March organisers, guided by the conservative theocratic politics of the Nation of Islam, encouraged women to stay home (although many came, despite what they were told to do), yet remain by the side of their men. The movement was a "man's job." An archaic, outmoded, overt form of sexism was propagated as a central tenant necessary to guide Black people into the next century. In contradistinction to the March, The Seventh Pan African Congress resolved that a central component of the African liberation struggle was "to oppose all forms of oppression and exploitation of women both in the public and private domain. The democratisation process include the transformation of gender relations on the continent and in the diaspora."[10] Although the Congress resolutions spoke very broadly to the conditions of African women, the critical component was that the sentiments and aspirations articulated represented a very broad spectrum of African women challenging patriarchal domination in Africa and around the world.

My purpose here is not to present a comparative gendered analysis of the March and the Congress; however, I wish to underscore the centrality of the women's question with regard to US social movements in particular and Pan Africanist politics in general. Whether one is examining welfare reform in the United States, structural adjustment in Zambia, rape and food production in war torn Angola, informal economic activity in Jamaica or sweat shop labor conditions in Haiti, the question of women is critical. In addition, gendered centered politics should be concerned with the social construction of "maleness" and seek to critically interrogate the subjective and objective realities of African men.

How else are we to unseat patriarchal domination and make a dent in gender inequality? For sure, this question was not on the mind of Louis Farrakhan and his cohort who organised the Million Man March.

A Way Forward

During the Seventh Pan African Congress, a resolution was passed by the general body which accepted the invitation offered by Libyan delegates that the Eighth Pan African Congress be convened in Tripoli, Libya.[11] North American delegate Kwame Toure championed this call, reasoning that only "real Pan Africanist" and "agents of imperialism"(i.e. CIA, British Intelligence etc.) would attend the Tripoli meeting given the sanctions imposed by the United States government and the possible consequences following those who would travel there. According to Toure there would be no middle of the road activists posing as Pan Africanists. This position was meant to isolate and intimidate many of the delegates from North America who did not have twenty page resumes highlighting their Pan Africanist activities.

The logic in Toure's assertion did not stand up to the historical record. How would he have characterised previous delegations to Libya in the 1980's during the heyday of the Reagan administration where "middle of the roaders" found themselves in Tripoli? More importantly, how would he assess the politics of Louis Farrakhan's recent 35 day 23 country tour of Africa and the Middle East which included an extended stay in Libya? What are we to make of Farrakhan's meetings with Nigerian military dictator General Sani Abacha on the heels of the Shell inspired execution of nine Ogoni activists fighting typical Trans-National Corporation (TNC) environmental destruction? Drawing comparisons between the biblical Moses and Sani Abacha, Farrakhan stated that Moses was a dictator who inflicted "stern discipline" when it was needed. In reference to Nigeria's military dictatorship Farrakhan said, "only in that military kind of way can a nation that has been down come up and get going."[12] In addition to supporting Abacha and calling for a three year extension of his post as head of the military junta, Farrakhan also held talks and developed alliances with the radical fundamentalist government in the Sudan which seeks to create a theocratic state and oppress the country's southern majority.

Without question the alliances made by Farrakhan during his twenty-three country tour were out of step with the resolutions passed at the Seventh PAC in Kampala. His endorsement of military dictatorships and fundamentalist regimes speaks to his bourgeois oriented quasi-Pan African politics that seeks to maintain structures of domination which insure the rule of foreign capital and reactionary African leadership. Moreover, his visit to Libya speaks volumes to

Kwame Toure's Pan Africanist vision and assumptions concerning the Eighth PAC, assuming that Farrakhan is not on the payroll of the CIA.

Outside of mainstream media, there have been very few critical voices concerned with Farrakhan's twenty three nation tour and its implications for African-American leadership in the United States. Ben Chavis wholeheartedly endorsed the trip, while newly installed National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) executive director Kweisi Mfume refused to discuss the issue. Rainbow Coalition executive director Jesse Jackson regarded the Million Man March and his trip to Africa as having "two different agendas," and the Reverend Al Sharpton said he wouldn't rush to judgement regarding the Minister's trip.[13]

Opposing all of the latter, TransAfrica Forum President Randall Robinson regarded Farrakhan's trip as "disastrous" and was "deeply saddened" by some of his remarks during the tour. However, Patrice Lumumba Coalition Chairperson Elombe Brath offered the most striking criticism of the twenty three nation tour, totally denouncing Farrakhan's meetings in Africa, highlighting the class contradictions regarding the masses of African people and the bourgeois alliances made between Farrakhan and reactionary African leadership.

But we have seen this all before. On May 24-29, 1993 the African-African American Summit (AAAS) was convened in Libreville, Gabon. This was the second AAAS; the first was hosted by the late Felix Houphet-Boigny in Abidjan, Cote d'Ivoire. The principal aim of the Summit was to strengthen the ties between Africans and African-Americans. Participants in the Gabon Summit included "Heads of State from fifteen African countries...and high level government representatives from many others." The United States delegation consisted of over 800 participants, including marquis names such as the Reverend Jesse Jackson, former Virginia Governor Douglas Wilder, Minister Louis Farrakhan and a host of entertainers including Ossie Davis, Ruby Dee, Cecily Tyson and Dick Gregory.[14]

In addition to the US delegates, US multi-national corporation representatives were invited to the Summit. Principally organised by the Reverend Leon Sullivan (General Motors Board member), the primary objective of the Congress was to develop business links in an effort to "liberate" Africa from its economic woes. Mr. Lamond Godwin, key Summit organiser and Senior Director of American Express Bank, suggested that in order to relieve much of Africa's debt, policy makers must push the United States to enact a programme similar to that which was developed for Latin America — the Enterprise for Americas Initiative (EAI). He suggested that the EAI's package of debt relief, which included "new lending initiatives; investment promotion initiatives; trade liberalisation initiatives would help African "economies re-integrate themselves into the global economy." Mr. Godwin went on to suggest that the best financiers for these long term projects were multilateral institutions such as the World Bank and the African Development Bank. Furthermore, Godwin proposed that the United States provide more economic aid to Africa.

Without question the issue of debt is a complex one, however Godwin's suggestions mirror the policies supported by the IMF and World Bank. Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) have been a failure in Africa. Laced with the language of the "free market," Godwin's analysis of Third World debt assumed that the social and political realities in Africa would improve as a result of more foreign investment and trade liberalisation. Assuming that Africa needed to be re-integrated into the world economy, Godwin never asked where had Africa been thus far. World systems theorists have demonstrated that the Third World has been very much integrated into the global economy albeit as part of the periphery supplying natural résources and cheap labour.

Godwin's proposals represented the general ideological orientation of the AAAS. The linkages made by African Americans with African Heads of State, the inroads provided for multinational corporations and the emphasis placed on US aid to Africa reflected a certain class interest antithetical to the ideas and aspirations of grassroots movements seeking to move beyond elite politics and neo-colonial rule.

Interestingly, Farrakhan's (who also attended the Summit) twenty-three nation tour also reflected this convergence of class interest, although masked within a theocratic nationalist project that is hostile to white supremacy and overt forms of imperialist intervention. Given the relative success of the Million Man March, the demonisation of Farrakhan in the US media and the independent economic base of the Nation of Islam, Farrakhan was able to embark upon the twenty-three nation tour with impunity. In the same vain, the silence of Black leadership on the matter reflected its inability to link domestic concerns with international crises confronting Africans on the continent. We saw similar parallels a year ago in Haiti.

To address these crises, the Seventh Pan African Congress sought to provide a forum for the reorganisation of Pan Africanist politics for the 21st century. The "realisation of our political unity must be through organised mass action at the grassroots level comprised of African women, students, youth, workers, trade unions and revolutionary organisations." However, this unity must not be empty and uncritical of parasitic elements that seek to reinforce the crisis that we are currently facing.

Notes

1. Kampala Declaration: Seventh Pan African Congress General Declaration by the Delegates and Participants at the Pan African Congress, April 3-8, 1994.
2. A number of delegations convened local pre-Congresses prior to The Pan African Congress. In Zimbabwe a Southern Africa Regional Conference was held February 25-26, 1994. Resolutions are in the author's possession.

3. Seventh Pan African Congress News: Information Bulletin Of The Secretariat For The Seventh Pan African Congress, May 1993.
4. William Watkins, Abdul Alkalimat and Marian Kramer (1994) "The Seventh Pan African Congress: Notes From North American Delegates" in *Imagining Home: Class, Culture and Nationalism in the African Diaspora, eds.* Sidney Lemelle and Robin D. G.. Kelley, p. 355.
5. See Seventh PAC News, May 1993, p.9.
6. Eusi Kwayana Lecture Syracuse University, Spring 1993.
7. *Imagining Home,* pp. 351-360.
8. Robin D. G.. Kelley, "The Crisis: Is Self-Help the Capitalism of Fools?" *Village Voice,* March 1996.
9. Patricia J. Williams, "Different Drummer Please, Marchers!," *Nation* October 30, 1995, pp. 493-494.
10. See Kampala Declaration
11. See Seventh PAC News, May 1993.
12. "Nigerian Military Should Be Given A Chance-Farrakhan," *Deutsche Presse-Agentur,* 8 February 1996.
13. "Farrakhan's Controversial Trip Raises Questions About His Mission," Gannet News Service, 24 February 1996.
14. Fanon Che Wilkins (1994) "The African-African American Summit 1993: A Critique," *Southern Africa Political And Economic Monthly,* April, pp.60-61.