

Ours is a unique union

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was a Member of the National Assembly and of the Executive Council of Tanganyika from 1958 to 1961 and has been active in the corporate and philanthropic world for the past 64 years. He was an advisor to the Ministerial Committee of the Organisation of African Unity dealing with the Arab League on the oil crisis and was the deputy leader of Tanzania's delegation to the United Nations Preparatory Committee for the Rio Conference on Environment and Development. He was knighted by Queen Elizabeth in 2003 and in 2005 he was honoured with Pravasi Bharatiya Samman Award by the President of India Dr Abdul Kalam.

There was pomp, colour and fanfare at the Uhuru Stadium in Dar es Salaam on April 26 this year, when President Jakaya Mrisho Kikwete led thousands of Tanzanians and visiting dignitaries – including six heads of State – to celebrate 50 years of the Union between Tanganyika and Zanzibar.

The Union – a brainchild of the President of Tanganyika, Mwalimu Julius Nyerere and his Zanzibar counterpart, Abeid Amani Karume – to form the United Republic of Tanzania, has had both achievements and challenges during the past 50 years of its existence.

This is because the Union came at a time when the world experienced a fragile political atmosphere. Apart from independence movements in most African countries, there was the Cold War.

With Cuba on the side of the USSR – giving the latter a conduit to plant Washington-targeted nuclear weapons – the Western powers, especially the USA and UK feared that an autonomous Zanzibar that is close to Tanganyika and Kenya could easily turn into “the Cuba of Africa”, particularly since the Western nations had not recognised the new Revolutionary Government of Zanzibar and that during the period the German Democratic Republic (GDR), Cuba, China and the USSR were already exerting considerable influence.

So when Nyerere and Karume decided to unite – a decision that meant both Tanganyika and Zanzibar would lose their sovereignty to the United Republic of Tanzania – they were convinced that the milestone move would lead to national peace and prosperity.

Fifty years later, Tanzania has remained peaceful. Both Muslims and Christians live in peace and harmony with each other. Contrary to Tanganyika, whose politics were based only on ideologies and the need to be independent from colonial rule, Zanzibar's politics were largely based on race. Karume and his ASP accused the Zanzibar Nationalist Party (ZNP) of being Arab feudalists who were only in the Indian Ocean archipelago to act at the command of their masters in Oman. Likewise, the ZNP suspected the ASP of being a Trojan horse for the Mainland. Obviously, the Union has saved Zanzibar from such type of politics.

The Union also created a pre-runner to the African Union goal that Mwalimu Nyerere always advocated. Having failed, in 1963, to convince the leaders of Kenya and Uganda to unite with Tanganyika and form an East

African federation, Nyerere saw the Union with Zanzibar as a step towards his ultimate goal. Thus, when the East African Community (EAC) was formed in 1967, it did not come as a surprise. Though it collapsed in 1977, the idea never died out and a functional EAC was once again revived in 2000 under President Benjamin Mkapa.

Both Zanzibar and Tanganyika have benefited from the Union. The rich tapestry of Zanzibar's culture which brought together peoples of the neighbouring countries and as far away as Oman, Yemen, the Comoros, India and Persia, who interacted extensively in the fields of commerce, agriculture and the crafts now defines the entire Tanzania. Incidentally, dishes like chicken cooked in coconut milk (kuku wa kupaka) is now a popular recipe not only in Zanzibar but also on the Mainland and other parts of Africa.

The same is true of music. Taarab is now famous throughout Tanzania and beyond though it was originally imported into Zanzibar from Oman by Sultan Seyyid Barghash bin Said who ruled the Isles between 1870 and 1888.

Apparently, a well-known saying that: “When you play flute in Zanzibar, all Africans as far as the Lakes (Tanganyika, Nyasa and Victoria) dance”, becomes more meaningful with the Union.

From the tourism point of view, it is now easy to market Tanzania as a country that is rich not only in wildlife and the Kilimanjaro, but also Zanzibar's beaches.

These achievements notwithstanding, the system of the Union that was adopted by Mwalimu Nyerere and Karume remains a challenge to Tanzanians. By giving Zanzibar a chance to enjoy considerable autonomy in a number of areas except foreign affairs, defence, immigration, external trade and currency has certainly created conditions for the Isles to demand even more.

Despite the challenges, the Union between Tanganyika and Zanzibar remains unique in Africa and must, therefore, be protected and strengthened by all available means. For the truth is that the achievements of the Union by far do outweigh the challenges.

History shows that a number of attempts to unite various countries failed in the continent and beyond. The Union of Egypt and Syria – to form the United Arab Republic – existed for only three years beginning 1958. Similarly, the Union of African States that brought together Ghana, Guinea and Mali lasted for only five years (from 1958 to 1963).