WAS THERE SOMETHING MISSED IN THE DECOLONIZATION PROCESS IN AFRICA? KEYNOTE ADDRESS

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By way of introduction, let me say that I understand why you did not choose, as the theme of your conference, “What was missing at the time of independence?” There were too many things missing. Indeed, at a conference like this one you would not have had the time to scratch the surface of what was missing in Africa at the time of independence. The question that you have chosen, “Was there something missed in the decolonization process?” presents, in my view, a slightly different inquiry, namely, what was missed in the sense of what essential things went astray or fell through the cracks. I would say that a number of essential attributes of modern statehood fell through the cracks at the time of independence. I will try to identify some of the essential objectives that were missed and, once I have done that, I will deal with what has happened since then and highlight the efforts made by African States to remedy the situation in which they found themselves at the time of independence.

First of all, there was indeed independence, but freedom was a missed objective. With independence, the elite of the African countries inherited the colonial state with all of its accoutrements – the

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colonial power structure remained in place in terms of the police, civil service and security apparatus. The new governments perpetuated the practices of the colonial administration, and were thus hardly responsive to the needs of the society, despite the fact that after independence they were under the leadership of former freedom fighters. The freedom that was expected to come with independence became a chimera.

Second, external self-determination of the colonial territories was achieved in the form of independence, but the people’s self-determination (internal self-determination) in the sense of the consent of the governed either became short-lived or was in many cases another missed objective. The territory separated itself from the colonial empire, but the people were still unable to decide on their destiny, to choose their government freely and to enjoy fundamental human rights.

Third, external sovereignty was realized and the status of sovereign equality with other States was achieved in the formal sense, but real sovereignty, particularly in its internal aspect of exercising authority over the entire territory of the State, was missed. Worse still, external sovereignty was used as a fig leaf or a cloak by fragile States lacking the means of ensuring the welfare of their people; while internal sovereignty, when exercised, was based on Bodin’s definition of sovereignty in the sense of the supreme power of the State over its citizens unrestrained by law.

Fourth, there was an idolization of sovereignty – the newly independent African States appeared to have found their “Westphalian moment”. The ideals of Pan-Africanism appeared to have been sacrificed on the altar of independence. Instead of striving for integration and closer cooperation, the new States opted, under the OAU Charter of 1963, for a Westphalian concept of “billiard ball” States: opaque and invisible from the outside, they would only co-exist and touch each other, but would not interact or interfere in each other’s affairs. The only unifying factor – which it must be admitted was a powerful unifying factor – was the liberation of those African countries that were still under colonial or racist minority rule, particularly in Southern Africa.