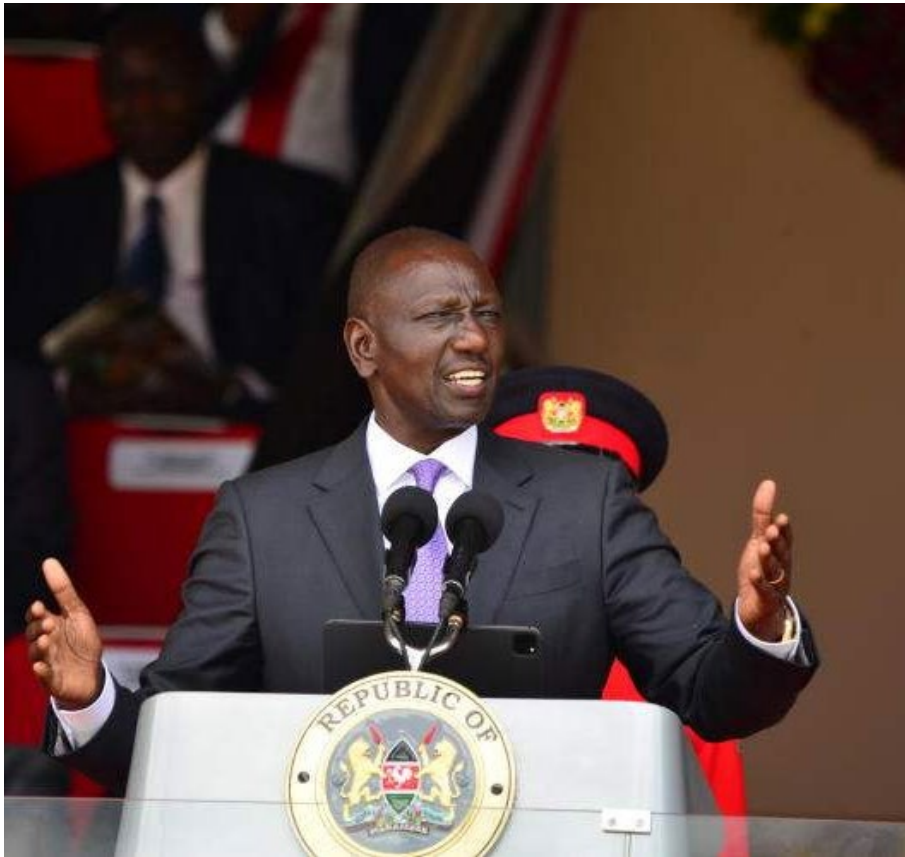


ERADICATE BARRIERS

Let's back free movement in Africa for Africans



BY MICHAEL MUTAVA

For whatever reason, people outside Africa would confuse Africa for a country. Some, especially Africans, find this slight inoffensive, but what if it is the cue to actually assume a continental posture?

The history of African statehood dates back to the colonial era, where we were cut and served up as dinner by our erstwhile colonizers. Heads of states of independent African countries are known to focus on safeguarding their borders, and collaborating only from a distance, which in actual sense was euphemism for protecting power and all its trappings. But for keen observers, there is always nothing good to write home about especially in terms of meaningful economic growth. Indeed, we were defeated

and conquered.

This year, the GDP of a state in the US (California) is \$3.5 trillion, which is greater than the combined GDP of African countries at \$3.1 trillion. Away from the greater growth recorded in foreign countries, none of the 54 countries in Africa has a large enough market to absorb all its goods and services. This has a ripple effect on intra-African trade, which is currently struggling mainly because each country is clamoring for partnerships outside the continent.

Kenya has entered into trade deals with several foreign countries. But, the latest partnership with European Union (EU) that requires the country to open up to imports from Europe over a period of 25 years, is as absurd as the Rwanda-US AGOA trade deal that went sour. It was in 2016 that Kenya signed an initial deal with the

EU alongside six other East African Community trade partners in an effort to stimulate investments and manufacturing. It mattered little to most of the East African Community countries hence it did not take off. For Kenya, the bilateral agreement will stimulate economic growth.

In 2018, our leaders had another awakening, this time round acknowledging that the continent stood to benefit from greater trade and movement of people. They signed the Africa Free Trade Agreement (AFCTA) and the free movement of people protocol. The AFCTA agreement has since been ratified, and appears to be on the right path. To date, 47 countries have ratified the agreement with Kenya being part of the countries doing the pilot test. The other countries are Cameroon, Egypt, Ghana, Kenya, Mauritius, Rwanda, Tanzania and Tunisia.

While there has been a widespread appreciation of AFCTA, the same cannot be said of the free movement of persons agreement. Since its signing, only Rwanda, Niger, Mali and Sao Tome have ratified it. When it comes to intra-African trade, traders must move around freely. Are you, for example able to import from a foreign country, but visiting the same country becomes an uphill task simply because of lack of free movement of persons? How did we sign

For a bilateral deal to be all inclusive, we must extend our affection for foreign goods, to the truck driver bringing the goods, or the foreigner setting up shop to produce those goods locally. The political class cannot appear to accept one and reject the other as both agreements feed into each other.

One of the main concerns about free movement of people is that it is “free” leading to unfettered access at the borders – free movement implies eradication of barriers. And it does not present any greater risks than we are currently facing.

President William Ruto has shown that he is amenable and committed to the idea of free mobility of people in the continent. The bilateral initiatives to waive off visa requirements with South Africa and Angola, as well as his verbal indication that the country welcomes all foreigners is a step in the right direction, and is deepening trade and investment ties between Kenya and other nations. The president is showing great leadership in this regard, but he must do one more thing to consolidate his pan African position: back the free movement of persons ratification process in Kenya. **NBM**