

This story provides an example of pulling from my experience to spot a story that no one else did.

I kept myself on the African Union's e-mail list after leaving Ethiopia. One day they sent me dull press release that said they were working on the transformation of the AU Commission and the establishment of the framework and architecture of the African Union Authority. Blah blah blah, right?

Then I remembered the Gadhafi connection and thought it might make for an interesting, albeit wonky, sidebar as events unfolded in Libya.

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¶ JOHANNESBURG (AP) _ As Libya's leader struggles to keep his grip on power, one of his pet projects appears to be moving ahead at the African Union, which is taking initial steps toward creating his grand plan: the United States of Africa.

¶ AU officials met Monday and Tuesday at the organization's Ethiopia headquarters to discuss the formation of the African Union Authority, an institution that would replace the existing AU Commission with the aim of eventually bringing Africa's countries under a single unity government.

¶ For years, Moammar Gadhafi has touted the idea at AU summits and even canvassed West Africa to garner support. Some leaders have supported the idea. Others have urged the slow development

of economic communities and allegiances that analysts say will let them cement their regional ties and position.

¶ When the eccentric Libyan leader became the union's chairman in 2009, AU members announced they would form the Authority, a plan they cemented later that year at a summit Gadhafi hosted in his hometown of Sirte.

¶ In announcing the decision, Tanzanian president and outgoing AU head Jakaya Kikwete said of the transition: "the ultimate is the United States of Africa."

¶ AU officials would not comment on Gadhafi's link to the idea when asked about it this week. The AU last week set up a panel of five leaders to mediate in Libya's rebellion, but has not said whether they believe Gadhafi should remain in power.

¶ "We condemn the disproportionate use of force," spokesman Nouredine Mezni said. "We are taking this issue of Libya very seriously."

¶ South Africa-based analyst Francis Ikome acknowledged the odd confluence of events but said while Gadhafi has been the main proponent of unity in recent years, the idea dates back to the 1960s.

¶ "I would want to imagine that the message they would want to send is that continental integration will not stop all of a sudden just because Gadhafi is no longer there," he said.

¶ Speaking at the opening ceremony on Monday, AU legal counsel Ben Kioko said the new Authority will allow the AU to "play a more active role and continue to be relevant for the peoples of Africa as well as to respond to the demands of prevailing challenges."

¶ The AU is embracing unification at a particularly difficult time. Of the organization's 53 members, four are suspended, three have suffered popular uprisings, and another, Somalia, is entering its third decade of all-out war.

¶ Egypt and Libya, two of the organization's biggest contributors, are in the midst of political turmoil, as West African powerhouse Ivory Coast struggles with growing violence after a political crisis.

¶ "Some people think that the continent is nowhere near ready for the unity that Gadhafi is pushing," said Ikome, who leads the African Conflict Prevention program at the Pretoria-based Institute for Security Studies. "And while many leaders publicly pay lip service to this idea, they don't really support it."

¶ But Ikome said the new Authority may be able to do more than the AU currently can to solve the continent's problems.

¶ "It would have been useful to prioritize, to try to put out the fires that are currently burning across the continent," he said. "But you have to acknowledge that to put these fires out

it might be useful to have a degree of unity. ... A problem with the AU is that it has lacked teeth."

¶ Libya has long played a big role in the organization. Gadhafi used Libya's oil wealth to fund the transformation of the old Organization of African Unity into the African Union in 2002.

¶ It is not clear whether Gadhafi's concept of a united Africa would be a democratic one. He attends the AU's annual summits flanked by a coterie of extravagantly dressed men who call themselves the "traditional kings of Africa" and describe Gadhafi as the lead king.