



Drivers of African Instability

OE Watch Commentary: The accompanying article from a South African source discusses some factors that drive instability in Africa, in addition to how armed conflict is changing in the continent. It claims that Africa will remain turbulent not just because it has so many young people and such extensive poverty, but also because development is disruptive. It points out that there are many more non-state actors than there were in the past. Thus, conflicts are no longer between a government and one specific armed group but rather between the government and multiple armed groups. Additionally, many of these groups fight amongst themselves, greatly complicating any nationwide peacemaking attempts.

One factor that provides fertile soil for conflict is terrorism, which has been increasing in Africa. While it has been around for a long time, now the continent is also struggling with violent political extremism that originated in the Middle East. Indeed the accompanying article asks if al-Qaeda and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) will move their activities to Africa, as they see their positions weakened in parts of the Middle East.

In addition to terrorism, poverty and demographics are also discussed as factors that drive conflict. Poverty is a large one, especially since it is frequently exacerbated by income inequality. Related to that is demographics and the youth bulge: The median age of the population is only 19, and when young people lack jobs, instability often follows.

The article claims that for Africa to significantly reduce its poverty, it would have to grow by approximately 7% per year. However, long term forecasts for most of the continent are way below that. Thus, while there is development-- and indeed in some sectors such as telecom it is quite robust-- the rate of job growth is not sufficient for the growing population. Complicating matters is, as mentioned earlier, that sometimes development itself can be quite disruptive.

The democracy deficit is another factor that is noted. African governments which should be providing solutions to these problems are instead sometimes the sources of additional instability. Full democracies or full autocracies tend to be the most stable forms of government, but many African regimes are a mixture of both, often superficially appearing democratic but lacking the constitutional liberties that enable democracies to successfully function. This democracy deficit is especially apparent around election time when tensions often build up and ultimately explode in violence.

There are exceptions. While poor African countries remain dependent on foreign aid, middle income ones are actually attracting foreign investment. Still, for many countries violence will continue into the foreseeable future. Thus, as the accompanying article relates, the African Union's Agenda 2063 which expects the continent can "silence the guns by 2020" remains unrealistically optimistic. **End OE Watch Commentary (Feldman)**



Drivers of conflict, such as those that led to the Rwandan genocide, persist in parts of Africa.
Source: Tiggy Ridley/Flickr, <https://goo.gl/cnt5us>, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.

“Violence will remain a characteristic of a number of African countries for many years to come and Africa should plan accordingly.”

Source: Jakkie Cilliers, “What drives instability in Africa and what can be done about it,” *The Conversation (South Africa)*, 28 November 2017. <https://theconversation.com/what-drives-instability-in-africa-and-what-can-be-done-about-it-87626>

These seven related factors indicate that the notion that Africa can somehow “silence the guns by 2020”, as advocated by the African Union as part of its Agenda 2063 is unrealistic. Violence will remain a characteristic of a number of African countries for many years to come and Africa should plan accordingly.

Internal armed conflict is much more prevalent in poor countries than in rich ones. This is not because poor people are violent but because poor states lack the ability to ensure law and order. The impact of poverty is exacerbated by inequality, such as in South Africa.

A history of violence is generally the best predictor of future violence... This is very difficult to break. It requires a huge effort and is very expensive, often requiring a large, multi-dimensional peace mission that only the UN can provide. But, scaling peacekeeping back rather than scaling it up is the order of the day at the UN.