

Conflict Trends in Africa, 1946-2004: A Macro-Comparative Perspective

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Executive Summary

Sub-Saharan Africa is an extremely weak and volatile regional sub-system in the globalizing world system; pervasive and persistent violence has confounded efforts to improve economic capacity and performance in the region. Eight macro-comparative perspectives on conflict trends in Africa are charted in order to establish a fairly comprehensive picture and understanding of the background of the situation in the region in mid-2005. Regional variations in three principal conflict trends are then presented for the Central, East, West, and Southern regions of Africa. The report concludes with discussions of three models that help to explain the conditions that undermine stability and limit the capacity of African states to better manage societal conflicts. The report also includes seven data annexes that list 1) major armed conflicts and other violent internal crises; 2) adverse regime changes and coups d'état; 3) periods of political instability; 4) minority groups involved in violent conflicts; 5) peace agreements; 6) drivers of post-formation instability; and 7) factors of general peace-building capacity.

The report documents the following principle conflict trends in Africa:

- The total magnitude of major armed conflicts increased rapidly during the decolonialization period (mid-1950s through the mid-1970s); it increased strongly again through the 1980s. The general trend reversed in the 1990s and has decreased by nearly 50% since its peak in 1991. The vast majority of armed conflicts since 1955 have been societal (ethnic, communal, and revolutionary) wars; international wars are largely accounted as wars of independence during the decolonialization period.
- The total numbers of “forcibly displaced populations” (refugees and internally displaced persons) appears to have skyrocketed from the mid-1980s through the early 1990s; the numbers fell sharply (by about half) in the mid-1990s and have risen slowly since. There are currently about 15 million displaced, mainly internally displaced (there are about 3.5 million transnational refugees). The relatively recent, sharp increases and large numbers of displaced persons may partly reflect the increased attention that the humanitarian plight of the displaced has received from the international community.
- Two distinct trends in political instability have combined to keep general levels of instability quite high in Africa since the first wave of independence in 1960. Over half of new countries in Africa experienced varying periods of “state-formation instability” and three countries have not yet gained initial stability: Nigeria, Sudan, and Uganda. Instances of “post-formation instability” increased dramatically with the end of the greater Cold War period; two principle factors involve difficulties/opportunities associated with regime liberalization processes and countries with large Muslim populations (over 40% of the country’s total population).
- Democratic forms of governance were generally few and short-lived through the decolonialization and Cold War periods; most African regimes were autocratic and well over half of African regimes were ruled by ethnically-exclusive political elites. Autocratic regimes fell from a peak of 36 countries (of 41 total) in 1989 to only 5 (of 43) in 2004. Democratic regimes, however, have emerged only slowly (13 in 2004, from 3 in 1989). Most regimes in Africa are characterized by mixed democratic and autocratic traits; ethnic exclusivity of ruling elites remains high. The problem of extreme failures of states doubled in the 1990s, affecting about 10% of African countries.

- The number of minority groups subject to official policies of political discrimination has fallen steadily since the mid-1980s (by about 70%), whereas the number of groups benefiting from remedial policies increased steadily from 1960 through the 1990s. On the other hand, the number of groups that continue to be politically disadvantaged due to historical conditions or through general social practice remains fairly high and level.
- There is some evidence of a dramatic increase in both the number and level of violence of inter-communal conflicts in the 1990s, although this may be partly explained by an increase in media reporting since the end of the Cold War. It may also be partly due to the proliferation of light weapons.
- Whereas there has been some progress charted in each of the four sub-regions of Africa, the Central and East Africa regions remain highly unstable and volatile. West Africa shows some substantial signs of recovery from the instability that has plagued the area mainly in the 1990s. Southern Africa has shown very strong trends toward stabilization and recovery since the early 1990s.

The report uses macro-comparative, statistical modeling to identify key explanatory factors in state formation and post-formation instability in African states and general peace-building capacity:

- “State formation instability” is largely explained either by “political factionalism” in more open political systems or “exclusivity” by ruling elites in more autocratic states. These structural conditions of politically divisive contentiousness stem from problems of social marginalization and system manageability.
- “Post-formation instability” is explained by varying combinations of dependency, polarization, unmanageability, leadership succession, neighborhood (spillover) effects, and large Muslim population.
- “Peace-building capacity” measures the ability of a state to manage conflict and respond to domestic challenges peacefully; peace-building capacity is greater in countries that can provide reasonable levels of human security, have no official policies of discrimination, have successfully managed previous group demands for greater self-determination, maintain stable and durable (democratic) governance institutions, have attained substantial human and material resources, and are free from serious threats from neighboring countries.

The peace-building capacities of African states are generally weak but there are some signs of improvement in recent years. This is particularly important given the increasing challenges that many African countries are facing. In the absence of the conflict mitigating effects of a broad-based, proactive civil society with substantial stakes and personal interests in maintaining the system, elite rivalry, outgroup resistance, and entrepreneurial violence can be expected to further complicate the inherent problems of manageability in African societies. Globalization adds powerful, new dynamics to politics in weak African states that are not fully understood but almost entirely unregulated. Yet, given the propensity for instability in African states, the substantial decreases in armed conflict, autocratic regimes, political discrimination, and political instability charted over the past several years are encouraging. A downside to the decrease in wars is an attendant increase in unemployed fighters; increases in organized crime are common in post-conflict regions. Given the general weakness of the commercial sector and civil society in many African countries, the recent shift toward the democratization of central government will be difficult to sustain. Proactive international engagement, particularly by governments, is and will remain crucial over the medium term (ten to twenty-five years) in helping countries to manage social tensions and stimulate the development of self-regulating civil societies.

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