

An Analysis of the Causes and Dynamics of African Conflicts

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Abstract

The African continent has been susceptible to intra and inter-state conflicts since the attainment of independence over six decades ago. These conflicts have impacted negatively on the socio-economic, political, and sustainable development of the continent. In Africa there is the thesis on the inevitability of conflict due to Africa's plural configuration and contraption of nations and ethnic nationalities. This paper examines the causes and dynamics of conflicts in Africa. It adopts a qualitative method with reliance on the secondary sources of data alongside the Protracted Social Contract Theory as a theoretical framework. The paper found that the origin of African conflicts has both national and international dimensions. The national aspect has to do with the composition and structure of the African states while the international is a reflection of the impacts of colonialism, imperialism, global political economy, globalization, and the ideological contest between capitalism and communism. It argued that in order to solve or manage African conflicts, there must be a thorough conflict analysis, followed by African solutions to African problems, the use of political solution, good governance, and international partnerships. The paper concludes with the idea that most African conflicts are internal, intractable, and protracted hence they can only be managed systematically.

Keywords: Intra-state conflict, Inter-state conflict, Protracted social conflict, Africa

Introduction

Conflict is inevitable and is a natural feature of all human societies. Modern war is not an expression of innate aggression but an economic and social construction. It is an attempt to settle violent disputes over political power, territorial and ethnic issues, and societal stresses such as injustice and poverty (Holstock & Jarquin, 2002).



Africa as a tribal society, there is the thesis of the inevitability of conflict in the African continent. This argument is still being debated among scholars of peace studies, international relations, political science, and social sciences in general. Nowhere in the world is the demand for peace more prominent and challenging than in Africa. From state collapse and anarchy in Somalia to protracted wars and rampant corruption in the Congo; from bloody civil war and extreme poverty in Sierra Leone to humanitarian crisis and authoritarianism in Sudan, the continent is the focus of growing political and media attention (David, 2008).

Since the attainment of independence of African countries six decades ago the recurring question has been on intra and inter-state conflicts, war, poverty, insecurity, and underdevelopment challenges (Ake, 1985). The causes of African conflict are both internal and external. Most of the historical conflicts in Africa have taken place in the context of the slight decrease in the number of armed conflicts and the consolidation of the post-conflict reconstruction process. Moreover, African regional organizations have staged an increasingly more active internal shift in matters related to peace and security, encouraged by the idea of promoting "African solutions to African problems" (Grasa & Mateos, 2010).

Africa and the Phenomenon of Conflicts

Africa is the second-largest continent in the world after Asia, covering about one-fifth of the total land surface of the earth. In antiquity the Greeks are said to have called the continent *Libya* and the Romans called it *Africa*, perhaps from the *Latin aprica* ("sunny") or the Greek *aphrike* ("without cold"). The name Africa, which was chiefly applied to the northern coast of the continent, was regarded as a Southern extension of Europe. Presently, the continent has 55 independent states with a population of 1.2 billion people. A continent endowed with abundant human and natural resources that shape the geopolitics of the international political economy (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2020).

Africa is probably the first home of mankind, but it is the last place to be made truly habitable because of ecological, technical, and socio-political conditions. Moreover, Africans are not the most brutalized of people, but are probably the most humiliated in modern history, with their humiliation encompassing slave trade and treatment as third-class citizens on their continent. This provides the basis of the argument that colonialism has introduced violence, conflict, and war in Africa through its system of divide and rule, and pillage (Mazrui, 1980).

Most of the literature on African conflicts have identified the intra-state and inter-state conflict as the two major categorizations of African conflicts that would further be sub-divided into groups of civil wars, territorial, communal, ethnic nationalism, liberation movements, political transitions, and religious conflict respectively (United Nations, 1960).

In the 15th edition of the Global Peace Index (GPI) produced by the Institute for Economics and Peace (IEP), 163 independent states and territories ranked according to their level of peacefulness. This report presents the most comprehensive data-driven analysis to date on trends



in peace, its economic value, and how to develop peaceful societies. It measures the degree of peacefulness using 23 qualitative and quantitative indicators from highly respected sources and measures the state of peace across three domains: the level of Societal Safety and Security, the extent of Ongoing Domestic and International Conflict, and the degree of Militarisation. Since 2010, the number of conflicts globally has increased by 88 percent. The experience of violence is highest in sub-Saharan Africa, where there are five countries; Somalia, South Sudan, Mali, Congo DRC, and Chad where more than half of the population have had a recent experience of violence (IEP, 2021).

The 2021 GPI reveals a world in which the conflicts and crises that emerged in the past decade have begun to abate, only to be replaced with a new wave of tension and uncertainty as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and rising tensions between many of the major powers.

The full impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on peacefulness is still unfolding. While some forms of violence declined in the short term, growing unease with lockdowns and rising economic uncertainty resulted in civil unrest increasingly in 2020. Over 5,000 pandemic-related violent events were recorded between January 2020 and April 2021.

It is still too early to fully gauge the long-term effects of the pandemic on peace in Africa and globally. However, the changing economic conditions in many nations increase the likelihood of political instability and violent demonstrations. Africa remains vulnerable to violence and conflict since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic as a new dimension of the driver of conflict.

Protracted Social Conflict Theory: A Framework of Analysis

This study is anchored on the Protracted Social Conflict (PSC) theory which has its origin in the work of a Lebanese Professor of political science Edward E. Azar, who distinguished protracted social conflict by their intractability and longevity with the former characteristic being responsible for the latter. A protracted conflict is a conflict that is complex, severe, enduring, and often violent. PSC is the type of conflict that is ongoing and seemingly unresolvable as in Lebanon, Israel-Palestine or Soviet-USA relations (Azar, 1985). There are four preconditions and assumptions as to the sources of PSC; communal content, deprivation of human needs, governance and state's role, and international linkages. The longevity of a protracted conflict can take two main forms. Protracted conflicts can be marked by the longevity of the main conflict or a series of many different conflicts. There are those with criminal and economic dimensions and may involve a range of micro-conflicts that take the advantage of a larger armed conflict to settle scores. These conflicts may have national and international dimensions.

According to the International Committee of the Red Cross (2016), there are different types of protracted conflicts. First, the fragmented and mutating conflicts which last for many years and is characterized by significant fragmentation and mutation. It involves the rise of new armed groups, splintering armed forces, and recurring political factionalism. Sources of conflict change

over time. New goals and ideologies emerge, which disrupt and reframe the previous structure of conflict. This has been the trend in the last two decades. The war on terrorism, violence over natural resources, tribal conflicts, and struggles over state power among others are some examples of such conflicts.

Secondly, episodic conflict is those multiple and long-term conflicts that involve periods of differing intensity over time and space. The intensity of the conflict is not usually constant but is often seasonal, or it spikes in more intense episodes. The episodic character is another feature of protracted conflicts and means that relative peace can last for months at a time, or exist across large parts of a conflicted territory, while violence rages in specific and frequently changing hot spots.

The third is the internationalized conflict where long non-international armed conflicts are prone to different levels and moments of internationalization as other states and international organizations enter the conflict in various forms either directly or through proxies, or in internationally mandated forces. Many armed conflicts are also internationalized differently, by the rise of the transnational armed groups that operates globally. Examples in Africa include; Al-Shabaab in Somalia that has a domino effect on Kenya, Boko Haram insurgency in Nigeria that affects Chad, Niger, and Cameroun, and Libyan civil war that spreads to Mali and other African countries. Therefore, most conflicts in Africa are identity-based and a result of the states' failure to provide basic human needs, and sometimes the conflict has international linkages.

Causes, Types, and Characteristics of Conflicts in Africa

There is no single, universal and acceptable understanding of African conflicts. However, there are different perspectives on the causes, types, factors, and characteristics of African conflicts. Brown (1996) has identified the causes of internal conflicts in Africa as structural, political, economic/social, and cultural/perceptual factors.

The post-independence period and the end of the cold war informed our thinking that African conflicts should be divided into five categories namely: decolonization power struggles, conflict from leftover liberation movements, conflict over ill-defined territory, structural rivalries over the distribution of power, and conflict of runaway means (Zaartman, 1985).

According to Chazan (1988), there are five types of conflicts in Africa which include; elite, factional, communal, mass, and popular conflicts that are most prevalent in post-independence Africa. Globalization through democracy and trade triggers conflict in Africa drawing from negative impacts.

It equally argued that African conflicts manifest in the following six types; inter-ethnic conflict, inter-state conflicts, liberation conflicts, civil rights conflicts, annexationist conflicts, and political transition conflicts (Achankeng, 2013).



In its study, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan has identified two major types of conflicts in Africa; inter-state and intra-state. It further stated that the origins of the conflict are manifold and complex, rooted in the international and national arenas, and encompassing economic, political, cultural, and social parameters. Among the international factors, particularly noteworthy are the consequences derived from the end of the Cold War and its aftermath, as well as the globalization and liberalization of the world economy, which have generated a sense of political and economic insecurity in Africa (MOFA Japan, undated).

The Department for International Development (DFID) has grouped the causes of African conflict into primary, secondary, and tertiary while the primary consist of inequality, state collapse, economic decline, and economic shock, history and natural resource wealth. The secondary causes are unemployment, lack of population and population pressure, the abuse of ethnicity and availability of arms. The tertiary causes include regional and interlocking conflicts, the conflict cycle, the lack of guarantors, inadequate and inappropriate mediation, and misplaced humanitarian assistance (DFID, 2001, 12-15).

The current context of conflict in Africa can easily take four distinct types; conventional warfare/wars of attrition, factional warfare, genocide, and ethnic-based conflict and the "new warfare" (DFID, 2001:8-9).

Conflict may arise from any of the four economic hypotheses; the first being group motivation hypotheses which consist mainly of fighting between groups, group motives, resentments, and ambitions all of which provide motivations for war. These groups may be divided along cultural, religious, geographical, and class differences (Gurr, 1993). Secondly, the private motivation hypothesis which states that war confers benefits on individuals as well as cost which can motivate people to fight. Young uneducated men may gain employment as soldiers. War generates opportunities to loot, trade in arms, drugs, diamonds, timber, and other commodities (Hoeffler, 2000).

Thirdly, it is the failure of the social contract. This derives from the view that social stability is based on a hypothetical social contract between the people and government. People accept state authority so long as the state delivers services and provides reasonable economic conditions (Nafziger, Stewart, & Vayrynen, 2000).

Fourthly, the Green war hypothesis, this point to environmental degradation as a source of poverty and cause of conflict. For example, rising population pressure and falling agricultural productivity may lead to land disputes. The growing scarcity of water may provoke conflict (Homer-Dixon, 1994; Kaplan, 1994). Hence, the four hypotheses are not in a way mutually exclusive (Stewart, 2002).

One major cause of conflict in Africa is the seat-tight leadership style otherwise called "president for life" by African leaders (Campbell & Grane, 2016). For instance, from Congo Kinshasa to Libya, Zimbabwe to Togo, Rwanda to Chad, and the Gambia to Cameroun there are conflicts



lasting for decades between government and rebels and pro-democracy groups against dictatorship. These political leaders have captured their countries' power through authoritarianism Mobutu Seseko 1965-1997, Col. Gaddafi 1969-2011, Mugabe 1980-2017, Eyadema 1967-2005, Kagame 2000 till date, Deby 1990-2021, Jammeh 1994-2016, and Biya 1982 till date.

The logic used by these African leaders to remain in power is through a constitutional amendment and divide and rule based on tribalism and patrimonialism. These have generated unending conflicts in Africa. Leaders in Africa have understood the fault lines and how to manipulate the sentiment of the masses they govern.

United Nations General Assembly Resolution 74/302 of September 2020 on Promotion of Durable Peace in Africa states thus:

Across the world, but notably in Africa, instability and conflict continue to generate and exacerbate poverty and institutional fragility, which in turn decrease resilience and the prospects for peace. The conflict has many different causes, drivers, and triggers. The present report examines the challenges of conflict prevention and sustaining peace in Africa from a perspective that is often overlooked, namely, the role of weak or failed public service planning and delivery as a source of instability and potential driver or trigger of conflict. In the report, this challenge is explored through four main fault lines in public service delivery observed in Africa, but which are not unique to the continent, namely, inequality in access to services; planning processes, and service delivery that do not promote the inclusion of all segments of the population; corruption in service delivery; and the delivery of services in areas where there are challenges to governance (United Nations, 2021).

Effects of Conflicts in Africa

According to DFID (2013) to understand the negative impact of conflict in Africa one needs to have a critical look at three broad dimensions; the human, economic and political cost of the conflicts. First, is the human tragedy which includes displacement, civilian casualties, violence, child soldiers, Secondly, the economic impact of loss of investment, national impact on production and livelihood, loss of infrastructure, and debt burden. Thirdly, political which undermine political stability, good governance, and development in Africa.

The cost of conflict and war negatively increases government spending in maintaining refugees, debt servicing, cost of doing business, and international loss of foreign direct investment to Africa. Most dangerous is the loss of lives and properties. African conflicts are mostly protracted with some lasting three to four decades with devastating consequences (New Routes, 2010).

Poverty is still massive and deeply rooted, and the processes that lead to the exclusion and marginalization of large segments of African societies are still ongoing. Exclusion and political marginalization of individuals, groups, and entire social classes are, as we know, among the root causes of many of the violent conflicts that have ravaged several African countries while aggravating underdevelopment and international dependence (CODESRIA, 2011).

Solutions to Conflicts in Africa

The popular maxim has been African solutions to African problems. The phrase was coined by Somalian political economist George Ayittey in response to the behavior of the international community towards Somalia. Since then the phrase acquired a degree of autonomy. The author advocates what he calls ownership of solutions that is, if you formulate your solutions to your problems, you would have every reason and incentive to it work. External or foreign solutions were not viable in Africa since they were either "imported" or "dictated" to Africans. Therefore, Africans would not own those solutions (Figuremariam, 2008).

However, Africa has entered the 21st century with unresolved issues like violent conflict, poverty, hunger, governance and democratic deficit, rapid urbanization, the national question, political fragmentation, food insecurity, terrorism, gender inequality, and lack of regional integration. For Africa to move forward it needs peace and unity, political stability and integration, all pointers to sustainable development.

For the above to take effect, the continent must first understand the nature of conflict. This would be achieved by way of conflict analysis. It is an attempt in understanding the various components of the conflict. These may include the background to the conflict, or the historical context, timelines, perspectives of the parties, the causes of the conflict, the positions, interests, and needs of the parties, the causes of the conflict, the short term and long term alternatives available for the transformation of the conflict (Best, 2006:62).

To realize that stages of the conflict must first be studied and identified. There are five stages to a conflict which are; pre-conflict, confrontation, crisis, outcome, and post-conflict. This will be followed by perspectives to the conflict to understand and interpret the parties involved in the conflict (Best, 2006:64-65).

The second step is the African solution to African problems. Even though, it is problematic because of the complexity and dynamism of the nature of some of the problems like international terrorism by Al-Shabaab in Somalia, Boko Haram in Nigeria, and ISWAP in West Africa, resource conflicts in Congo and Niger Delta, and transnational crimes among others.

According to the International Crisis Group, the hidden agendas of traditional interventions affect the effective use of the Africa Peace and Security Architecture (APSA), particularly the Africa Standby Force (ASF) in resolving conflict and wars in Africa. Despite, the endorsement of African solutions by Western powers and the United Nations, the implementation and use of

the approach is futile when applied without international assistance due to fear of interference by foreign interests (ICG, 2013).

This is because conflicts that are of international threat and dimension require the convergence of interests and quick response. The many sides of the challenges to African solutions to African problems is the African state's capacity in terms of; resources, unity, partnership, goals, and leadership to bring lasting peace to conflicts. The role of AU and other sub-regional bodies like ECOWAS, ECCAS, and SADC to conflict prevention, management, and resolution becomes imperative. Hence, alternative dispute resolution is also required particularly in internal or domestic conflict resolutions.

Thirdly, a political solution to conflict sometimes is better than the legal approach to inter-state disputes or between peoples of Africa. The political solution is usually through dialogue, give and take, consensus, negotiation, compromise, political inclusion, national truth, and reconciliation commissions, and advancing reciprocal inter-group relations among others.

Fourthly, good governance is key to solving African conflicts. If most of the African conflicts are internal then political leaders can use state capacity to improve on human rights, respect for rule of law, transparency, accountability, equality, and even development which will ultimately promote peace, security, and development in the continent (Annan, 2004).

The last but not least, is the global partnership needed with the United Nations, think tanks, and international civil society organizations that work in the areas of peace and conflict resolutions. African states should be concerned on issues as the control of the proliferation of arms, the punishment for war crime, and sanction for governments that violate human rights. This would undoubtedly reduce, control and help in achieving peace and conflict resolutions in Africa.

Conclusion

This paper examined the nature and causes of conflicts in Africa. The nature of the African conflict is multi-dimensional due to historical forces emanating from within African as a tribal society with ethnocentrism and xynocentrism. The advent of colonialism has added to the many sides of the conflicts in Africa. The article identified two major types of conflicts in Africa; intra and inter-state conflicts. These conflicts are caused by political, social, economic, and cultural factors in Africa and by extension internationally. Therefore, these conflicts are centered on interests, values, and ideology which make them more difficult to resolve even internally.

To resolve African conflicts, it is suggested that conflict analysis is the first step. This is aimed at understanding the history, type, causes, and interests in the conflicts. Moreover, it is pertinent to apply African solutions to African problems no matter their shortcomings. Political solutions and good governance and international partnership are also very useful methods to resolving African conflicts. Finally, it is the view in this paper, that most conflicts in Africa are intractable and protracted hence the need to manage them with the help of the United Nations, African Union, sub-regional bodies, and international or private organizations.

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