



NIAS-IPRI Brief

State of Peace and Conflict in Africa in 2021

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The continent of Africa in 2021 has been exposed to expansive Covid-19 pandemic, increased level of climate change, economic recession, along with other ongoing problems including increased violence, the return of military rule and authoritarian regimes, widening of ethnic fault lines and communal divides.

Introduction

The ongoing year (2021) has been an eventful one for Africa as the continent has been exposed to expansive Covid-19 pandemic, increased level of climate change, economic recession, along with other ongoing problems that the continent has been facing for a very long period such as ethnic and communal conflicts, inter-state wars and so on. As the current year comes to a close, certain major developments in Africa raises enhanced concerns while looking at the digression from the trajectory that Africa as a continent has traversed in the last decade, especially the increased number of conflicts and backsliding of democracy. The international and regional organizations, along with the national governments tried to address some of these issues, though the outcomes were not encouraging. The current trends and trajectories in the African States can have long terms effects on peace building in general and on the lives of people in Africa in particular, and regions beyond. Certain States such as Ethiopia has witnessed increased violence whereas after engaging with democracy, several States witnessed the return of military rule and authoritarian regimes such as in Sudan. Ethnic fault lines and communal divides began to widen in several instances prompting one to draw a few general trajectories. Spread of Covid and health impacts, economic crisis, and the spread of large-scale internal migrations are compounding the situation in the region in current year.

Major Conflicts and Developments in Africa during 2021

The year 2021, like many other regions, exposed Africa to the Covid pandemic at a bigger scale with around 8.7 million people being exposed to the deadly virus so far. In a way, states like South Africa, Morocco, Tunisia, and Ethiopia bore the brunt of most of the new infections. Covid pandemic, consequent lockdown and economic recession, along with existing crises has begun to shape Africa in the year 2021. In 2021, pandemic resulted in various kinds of conflicts in Africa emanating out of Covid protocol management, lack of resources to deal with Covid (both medical and economic resources) along with other issues like over health securitization, postponement of the election, suspension of rights citing extraordinary situations and so on. South Africa is a noteworthy example in this context. Communal conflicts and ethnic violence have disrupted normal life in most of the States in the region like Nigeria where food crisis is expected for the year 2022 as the livelihood of common people is widely affected.ⁱ

Similarly, the climate change issues are estimated to affect 86 million Africans leading to migration within their countries and the region, according to a recent World Bank Study.ⁱⁱ In the climate front, West Africa, especially the Sahel region, will be severely affected.

Conflicts as a response to authoritarian tendencies are also visible in Ghana, Kenya, Algeria, and so on. In addition, extremist and terrorist groups like ISIS and Boko Haram in Nigeria too exploit the societal tensions and gaps in development and political representation among various communities and tribes to their advantage and indulge in increased instances of violence. Out of the other Violent Non-State Actors (VNSAs), Al Shabad, a transnational terrorist group, in Somalia, persists with attacks on the official and civilians within the country, Kenya, and the neighboring Somali. Recently, Global Conflict Tracker of Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) has indicated that out of the several major conflicts in Africa, Ethiopian conflict has worsened whereas the intensity of others continues to remain same (South Sudan, Mali, Somalia, Congo, Nigeria, Central African Republic).

There were several military interventions in Africa and the subsequent regimes, which in turn have escalated conflicts across the continent. Such intervention could be witnessed in Sudan, Guinea, Chad, and Mali. In Sudan, in October 2021, military leader, General Al Burhan declared emergency in the country and dismissed Prime Minister Abdala Hamdok who was leading a transitional government with the support of the military since 2019. Sudan, of course, has long history of experiencing frequent military coups and attempts to topple civilian governments. Since 1956, there have been five successful coups in Sudan. In fact, a transitional government through a coalition, involving the military and a pro-democracy group – Forces for Freedom and Chance (FFC) came to power in Sudan in 2019 after expelling Omar al-Bashir, the autocratic military ruler who was in power in Khartoum (1989-2019). The fall of the coalition government, one year before the term (three-year term was fixed to Prime Minister Hamdok when the coalition took over in 2019) clearly implies that democratization which was promised at the time of formation of transition government, is in crisis. In a very recent development, Hamdok was reinstated through an agreement signed between him and the military (on 21st November, 2021). However, it is alleged that there are provisions in the agreement which gives enormous power to military, especially to control the Sovereign Council.ⁱⁱⁱ It is yet to be seen how the agreement works and the transition to civilian government will take place in the near future. So is the case with other states like Nigeria. Even, the South Sudan, which was carved out of Sudan in 2011, is in the grip of several internal conflicts. In South Sudan and in Darfur, several thousand people were killed in the conflict. South Sudan seceded from Sudan in 2011. The agreements signed by conflicting parties Sudan People's Liberation Army-in-Government (SPLA-iG) and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement-in Opposition (SPLM/A-iO) that has questioned the Peace and Transitions accords such as ARCSS^{iv} (Agreement on the Resolution of Conflicts in South Sudan) and R-ARCSS (Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of Conflicts in South Sudan) under SPLA/M. Even in neighboring Uganda, Yoweri Museveni re-election as the President for the sixth term has raised questions about the validity of election processes and the anti-democratic rule that Museveni is presiding over in that country.

Similarly, in Chad, a central African State, after the death of Idris Deby,^v the then President, a military government under Mahamad Kaka has come to power. In Guinea, the military overthrew the government of President Alfa Conde, representing the political party - Rally of Guinean People (RGP) who ruled the country for 10 years. A transitional government came to power in Mali, a West African State too. A series of internal changes and minor power transfers were manifested within the military regime in Mali after the country witnessed the overthrow of the democratically elected President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita. Climate Change^{vi} is considered to be one of the reasons for the increased conflict in the country. Mozambique, which has second largest oil field in Africa, is in the grip of a civil war, leading to the killing of thousands of people. Cabo Delego and the North East province are also witnessing civil wars. Ethiopia, another prominent state in the horn of Africa, which is considered to be relatively stable state, is also going through a massive crisis. Abiy Ahmed, the Ethiopian President, a Nobel Laureate for Peace (in 2019), is in the forefront of war, leading a war against Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), a rebel group, by mobilizing his troupes and supporters. The TPLF is allegedly supported by the Western government of European Union and the US. Tigray region, where it is engaged in a major armed rebellion has pushed the region closer to a humanitarian crisis. In a way, TPLF dominated the Federal Government in Ethiopia for almost 27 years. The crisis is also linked to ethnic divide in the society.^{vii} Ethiopian troops are accused of a serious humanitarian crisis. There is a huge toll of death and the levels of internal displacement are so acute that thousands of people face starvation. If the leaders of Ethiopia do not take a pro-active role in building peace through the negotiations and reconciliation with each other, the solution to the conflict is distinctly distant. Similarly, even a dam construction – Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) has resulted in bitter conflicts involving Ethiopia, Egypt and Sudan. Apart from the climate change induced issues, there is an increased level of hunger since the civil war erupted last year (2020) with 5 million people living with hunger/food insecurity. So is the case with Nigeria, Chad and Congo. There are also groups in Africa which function in transnational fashion acting against multiple states. For instance, Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) militia has killed thousands of civilians and carried out multiple bombings in neighboring Uganda. Similarly, Western Sahara Conflict which was frozen is re-activated again with Polisario Front challenging Moroccan interference in the country.

Trends and Issues in 2021

A glance at these developments leads one to decipher a few broader trends and trajectories. However, unlike in the last decades, there has been substantial decline of democracy^{viii} in Africa and increase in number of civil wars/armed conflicts in the recent times. This is contrary to the trend in the realm of African polity in the last two decades wherein, since the end of Cold War, several of the African States have changed their polity from one party/military regime to multi-party system over a period of time. In this context, Freedom House in its report for the year 2021 highlighted a few countries from Africa showing significant digression from democratic path such as Ethiopia, Côte d'Ivoire and Malawi. Of course, very recently, Malawian Supreme Court reversed some of the anti-democratic policies and processes including the conduct of elections. It also reports that people living under free countries in Africa is at just 16 percent while some of the worst performers in democracy front are Somalia, Eritrea, Central African Republic and so on.^{ix}

Broadly, Africa which entered into the 'third wave of democratization' in the first decade of 21st century by way of conduct of elections, establishment of representative institutions (though partially as a response to pressure from Global lending bodies like WB and IMF, along with regional organizations like African Union (AU), human rights groups, UN bodies,), is facing a roll back at present. At least, procedural democracy in terms of conduct of elections/ referendum was carried out throughout the last two decades though the implementation of substantive democracy was in question in several States.^x One can certainly observe that there is a setback to democracy in Africa in the year 2021 as evident from the onset of military rules, sabotage of elections and suppression of human rights and so on. In 2021, so far, four countries have fallen to military rule. Several current conflicts in Africa are based on historical and ethnic fault lines and ethnic nationalism are raising its head once again. The conflict like in Ethiopia point to that direction. There are internal criticisms (like that of former Nigerian President Goodluck Jonathan) in Africa that several problems of Africa are due to the inability of African States to manage diversity. Such views point to the direction that multi-cultural, multi-ethnic oriented policies can address some of the conflicts in African societies. It is also a reflection of the decline of a pan-African vision of multi-ethnic, multi-cultural societies that the first-generation African leaders envisioned after decolonization in the continent. The recent conflict involving Ethiopia, Egypt and Sudan on Grand Ethiopian renaissance Dam (GERD) shows the decline of continental / regional mechanism to resolve inter-state crisis, even on pan-regional developmental issue. Several observers point out that there should be a regional solution to regional problems in Africa. Regional Organizations such as African Union (AU) can play a constructive role in this regard. Nigerian President, Olusegun Obasanjo's role through African Union is quite notable in this regard.

In the human security realm (non-traditional security areas), hunger has increased drastically with around 700 million people in Africa facing hunger/poverty related issues. These issues have to be seen in the larger context of developments such as democratization and economic development that the continent witnessed in the pre-covid times. The climate change and consequent loss of livelihood, migration, and food insecurity is leading to conflicts and aggravation of existing conflicts. The example of Mali is often invoked to substantiate such an argument. The developments in Africa in 2021 show that ethnic fault lines in the democratization processes, and lack of institutionalization of governance practices are deeply affecting the conflict resolution processes in the continent even in the relatively stable polities like that of South Africa. The covid situation has aggravated the problem. In addition, Covid related border securitization has led to the wiping away of livelihoods especially in areas like tourism, the main stay of several economies. In several states like South Africa, Kenya, Ghana, the decline of tourism has led to severe economic crisis. The disruption of global supply chain system also added to poor availability of resources in several countries which had an indirect effect on several conflicts. In addition, the involvement of foreign powers, both western and emerging powers, in conflicts are often referred. For instance, the role and involvement of France and China are invoked, especially in the conflicts related to Sahel (the former) and in Sudan, Zimbabwe, and Mozambique (in the case of latter).

Concluding Remarks

In 2021, Covid induced societal, socio-economic tensions, increasing level of authoritarian practices and democratic back-sliding make the current situation in Africa quite volatile. In this context, new conflicts can emerge, and existing low-intensity conflicts can transform into major ones (some to the level of civil wars). The authoritarian tendencies are already visible even in relatively stable democratic systems like South Africa. The case of Uganda is no different where questions on the validity of the election processes is raised and was hugely criticised by the Western governments. However, given the geo-strategic position of Uganda in Central and Eastern Africa, there is a huge possibility of Western governments supporting its president - Museveni, especially taking into the consideration the fact that Uganda has emerged as a stable state that confront terrorist organizations linked with Al-Qaeda. In other words, Africa is likely to face several issues next year, ranging from the COVID crisis, economic recession to inter-states conflicts on resources sharing (like of GERD). The deteriorating socio-economic land scape, along with rolling back of democratization can accentuate African crisis. Therefore, if global and regional attention and actions are not mobilized, Africa is likely to face serious issues in the long run. Perhaps, there should be regional solutions to African problems. At the same time, global or regional support to the conflicts is complimentary to the individual state-centric approaches. If major rich states from the world do not disengage from 'vaccine nationalism', there can be a huge crisis in Africa, which in turn will vitiate the situation in the entire region and the world. In certain big countries like Nigeria, hardly 5 percent of its population is vaccinated whereas a richer state like South Africa has vaccinated just over 24 percent of its population. Similarly, covid related travel restrictions can further cripple African economies, as evident from recent actions on the part of countries across the world to halt/regulate movement people from Africa due to the emergence new covid variant - Omicron. The Covid crisis is likely to aggravate and the economic crisis will deepen further. Endogenous democratic decline has become real in the African context. The developments in Ethiopia in 2021 is of utmost concern, and if not handled in a more inclusive approach, with due respect to the diverse and multiple cultural practices, this can lead to a major civil war which the country and the continent can ill afford.

ⁱ News Item, <https://reliefweb.int/report/nigeria/nigeria-key-message-update-crisis-ipc-phase-3-or-worse-outcomes-likely-conflict>, accessed on November 29,2021

ⁱⁱ Press Release, World Bank, October27,2021, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2021/10/27/climate-change-could-further-impact-africa-s-recovery-pushing-86-million-africans-to-migrate-within-their-own-countries>, accessed on November 28,2021.

ⁱⁱⁱ News, Reuters, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/hamdok-would-quit-if-post-coup-deal-not-implemented-supported-source-2021-12-01/>, accessed on November 27,2021

^{iv} An agreement signed between the Government of South Sudan and the South Sudan Armed Opposition under aegis of Intergovernmental Authority on Development in 2015, <https://peacemaker.un.org/node/2676>, accessed on November 28,2021. The same agreement was revived and modified in 2018 as Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflicts as R-ARCSS

^v Idis Deby died after sustaining injuries while combating the rebels in April, 2021, News, BBC, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-56815708>, accessed on May 1,2021.

^{vi} There are several studies which show that climate change lead to conflicts. The correlation between climate change and conflicts is indirect . Climate change leads food shortage which in turn trigger conflicts or aggravate exiting conflicts. Please see Mach, K.J., Kraan, C.M., Adger, W.N. *et al.* Climate as a risk factor for armed conflict. *Nature* **571**, 193–197 (2019). <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41586-019-1300-6>

^{vii} Oromo and Amhara are the major ethnic groups which constitute around sixty percent in the total of nearly 100 million population where as Tigrayans constitute around 6 per cent. Please see FactBox: Ethiopia's Ethnic Groups, Reuters, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ethiopia-politics-factbox-idUSKCN1G01HZ>, accessed on November 26,2021

^{viii} In the last decade (2000-2010), Africa registered an economic growth of 5.4 per cent, adding \$78 Billion annually to economy.^{viii} In general, African States have undergone substantial changes in terms of governance models, especially when one compares their situation in the last decade with one before the beginning of the century. All these have made observers predict (in the last two decades) that Africa has emerged on the centre stage of the world and an ascendancy of 'African Renaissance'.

^{ix} Freedom In The World 2021 (2021) , Freedom House, Washington DC, https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2021-02/FIW2021_World_02252021_FINAL-web-upload.pdf, accessed on November 29,2021

^x S.Shaji (2021) Democratisation in the Changing Economic Landscape of Africa: A Perspective in Nivedita Ray (eds) India and Africa : Road Ahead, New Delhi : KW Publishers.