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# Africa's wars

## The historical context

**O**f the current generation of wars in Africa, most are not new. They are not the result of globalisation, nor of the end of the Cold War, nor even of the economic crisis that has affected Africa so badly, although they have been shaped by those and other developments.

### The historical roots of violence

In most cases, it is possible to trace a direct line of descent from today's wars back to struggles in the middle of the last century, which in most of Africa was the late colonial period. At a time when power was up for grabs, political competition became focussed on the control of emerging independent states, and in some cases rivalries old and new became stained with blood and are stored in the memories of subsequent generations.

Rwanda is a good example, for although many people in the world had hardly heard of Rwanda until the genocide of 1994, the tragedies of recent years have to be understood in relation to a history of massacres and counter-massacres in the Great Lakes region, involving Hutus and Tutsis in both Rwanda

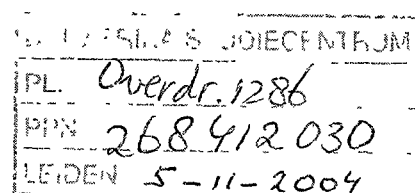
and Burundi, and affecting neighbouring populations in Congo, Uganda and Tanzania, that goes back to the 1950s and the period of decolonisation. For many Rwandans, 1994 was not a unique bloodbath: it was simply the most awful in a cycle of killings.

In Sudan too, the war of Khartoum against the south began in the 1950s, and is best seen as part of a wider struggle between the seat of government and its peripheral regions that is also plain to see in the current devastation of the country's western region of Darfur. In Liberia, although war broke out in 1989, just a few weeks after the fall of the Berlin wall, many Liberians place the start

of their misfortunes as the military dictatorship of the 1980s, or with the military coup that overthrew the old regime of the True Whig Party, outmoded and out of steam, at the start of that decade.

All over Africa, even in places where there are no wars, or where fighting has erupted only recently, as in Côte d'Ivoire, politics at the top level has generally been a ruthless business. Where Clausewitz defined war as a continuation of politics by other

*"All over Africa, even in places where there are no wars, or where fighting has erupted only recently, politics at the top level has generally been a ruthless business"*



means, the recent history of many parts of Africa reverses this dictum: high politics is war by other means. Probably the first intellectuals to grasp the nature of Africa's post-colonial politics were not academics, but novelists. Writers like Chinua Achebe and Ngugi wa Thiongo penning works in English, or Ahmadou Kourouma in French, clearly understood 30 or more years ago the nature of politics in the countries where they lived. For the most part, it was only much later that social scientists like the late Claude Ake were able to produce texts with anything approaching the same feeling for the ruthlessness and cynicism of politics in modern Africa.

It is well established that the pursuit of power is a ruthless and often cynical business all over the world, and that Africa has no monopoly in these matters. But presidents or prime ministers in more fortunate places, no matter how much they may crave power, are likely to find that they are obliged to relinquish tenure by judges who are guided by legal texts and by media that are generally in favour of limited mandates, while political leaders are unable to receive the support of generals in any bid to overturn the constitution. Europe and North America have generally succeeded in establishing firm institutional controls on the power of even the strongest chief executive of the state – although it is useful to recall that fascist dictatorships existed in western Europe even in the 1970s, and that there are plenty of current examples in central and southern Asia, Latin America and elsewhere that demonstrate that a militarised form of politics can prevail anywhere. Africa is not unique in that respect, either.

*"Many African commentators consider that the origin of the style of politics they have known since independence... lies in the colonial experience"*

### Explaining the causes

African intellectuals tend to attribute this state of affairs ultimately to colonial rule itself. They can point out that colonial rule was imposed by the use or threat of military force and that it largely disrespected the ideas about balancing and containing executive power that had previously prevailed in Africa. Once colonial rule was really established – which in much of the area south of the Sahara means a hundred years ago or even less – it was implemented by bureaucratic action formulated by functionaries of the state. By and large, only in the very last decade of colonial rule, in the 1950s, did colonial government in Africa contain any significant element of democracy. The process of decolonisation was in the end so fast that there was hardly time to blink between the authoritarianism of colonial governors and that of African presidents.

In short, many African commentators consider that the origin of the style of politics they have known since independence, including in those cases where political conflict and economic enrichment have turned violent, lies in the colonial experience. This, they maintain, was so crucial in forming the institutions of the states existing today as to have cast a shadow over subsequent generations.

All of this is true enough. But the key consideration has to be in regard to the implications of these observations. In other words: so what if colonial rule was oppressive? Africans have had almost half a century to put things right. Anyone who believes that a war becomes inevitable because of things that happened decades or even centuries ago is, in effect, arguing that they do not have any significant control over events or even over their own actions. So heavy is the weight of

history, they imply, that the living can do little but act in established patterns.

This seems unduly fatalistic and can also, it is important to note, be used by cynics to deny responsibility for their own misdeeds. Politicians who can convince their public that they are bound by historical forces to act in certain ways can get away with murder. Again, Africa has no monopoly on such ways of seeing the world: Northern Ireland has plenty of the same, as do India and Pakistan, or Israel and Palestine, also endlessly replaying the traumas of partition and the transfer of power in the aftermath of the Second World War.

### **The reinvention of Africa**

In this sense, today's generation of wars in Africa is a key historical moment. How people act and react, in Africa and outside, will determine what happens next. It will also shape Africans' ideas about the extent to which they actually can control their own destiny.

Like all crucial phases in history, it is impossible to interpret the meaning of current upheavals with confidence for as long as they are still in progress. Taking a long view, it is possible to take some stark comfort from European history, by pointing out that Europe's modern states were forged by battle, and that if states make wars, it is also true that wars make states. But Europe's history cannot be taken as a sure guide to Africa or to anywhere else which has a history of its own.

It could indeed emerge that war in Côte d'Ivoire or in the Great Lakes turns out in the longer run to be the crucible of new state formations, as the Thirty Years' War was in Europe three and a half centuries ago. But it is equally possible that such wars represent not the emergence of strong new states, but the erosion of most of the surviving institutions of colonial rule. It is possible that they will usher in a period of warlordism and

perpetual campaigning that also has a historical precedent, namely the raiding for plunder that was characteristic of the era of the slave trade.

Quite simply, we won't know until the new patterns become clear, over time. What can already be said with some confidence, however, is that the style of government introduced in colonial times is disappearing in much of Africa and that new patterns are emerging, fully integrated into the twenty-first century globe, but often showing interesting continuities with older African history also. The role of international organisations in African affairs, from Oxfam to the World Bank; the influence of global media; the exploitation of markets in arms, diamonds or anything else; the importance of diaspora populations and the transfer of remittances: these are all signs of the global integration of Africa's current wars. The reinvention of traditional initiation societies and the appeal to local histories of cooperation and conflict are signs of the weight of the past. In South Africa, this sense of an older African history reasserting itself is central to the notion that an African renaissance is taking place, or should be taking place. Other observers may prefer a different label, but whatever they call it, the tendency for Africa to reinvent itself cannot easily be doubted.

War is a grisly business, and the often blatant association between large-scale killing and crude self-enrichment in some of Africa's current wars can be hard to contemplate. However, there are at least two related ways in which political elites have reacted to the current wars in the continent that demonstrate some hopeful signs, and which, in any event, are shaping these wars.

One new development is the emergence of an aspiration in Africa itself to bring an end to particular wars through formal and coordinated state action. Examples include the success of the African Union (AU), largely at South African behest, in advancing a peace

process in Burundi, and the AU's willingness to disrespect the sovereignty of one of its member-states, Sudan, for the sake of alleviating suffering in Darfur. In this latter case, the action taken so far has been small in scale, but nonetheless marks a significant new attitude towards major conflicts. In the same sense, regional groupings such as IGAD in the Horn of Africa and ECOWAS in West Africa have played positive roles in attempts to end conflicts in southern Sudan and in Côte d'Ivoire respectively.

A second notable development in conflict resolution is a new and more productive recognition of the importance of cooperation between Africans and outsiders. A decade ago, it was hard to imagine any major African government tolerating or advocating a role for the armed forces of former colonial states in the solution of an African conflict. And yet no African conflict is a purely parochial matter: in the twenty-first century, all of them involve global strategic considerations and are connected to global markets. It is therefore logical to suppose that the resolution of such conflicts must also involve collaboration between African and non-African elements. Hence, the fact that the collaboration of British and United Nations forces in Sierra Leone, or of French and West African or UN forces in Côte d'Ivoire, has received the support of the Nigerian government, represents a major step forward. More precisely, it marks a recognition of the fact that the African states which emerged from colonial rule in the mid-20th century remain joint ventures in important respects, and that their immediate future is dependent on cooperation between Africans and outsiders.

This is not a new form of colonialism, for the essence of colonialism was the imposition of an inferior legal status by outsiders. The new joint ventures for peacekeeping or peace-making are negotiated, they have the legitimation of other African states and of the international community and they do not include any attempt to assign a particular legal status to Africans.

It is, alas, too soon to know whether the worst of Africa's wars is now behind us, or whether it is still to come. Much will depend on the success of efforts to restore peace in individual countries in a continent that has more UN peacekeeping missions than any other. Much too will depend on what happens in Iraq, which, like Africa, is largely a colonial creation that could conceivably fragment into smaller units and which thereby poses a huge challenge to the existing international order. The international order of which we speak is essentially that created at the end of the Second World War, when so many of the world's current states gained independence from colonial rule, and when many of today's institutions of international governance were established.

Africans will need to be convinced that it is possible to improve their position by their own efforts. But cold reality also suggests that, in so many parts of the continent, even radically improved governance can do little to lift people's living standards and future prospects if the rules and norms of international economic activity remain so heavily rigged against them ■