

Book Reviews

Phases of Conflict in Africa

Kadende-Kaiser, Rose & Kaiser, Paul J. (eds) 2005.
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Africa has been judged to be more afflicted by serious armed conflicts than any other region on the planet. It is however important to put the causes of these conflicts into proper perspective, rather than simply concluding that they are tribal or ethnic. In most cases, the underlying causes are closely interwoven in both national and international arenas. The international factors include the consequences of the Cold War and its aftermath, as well as the globalisation and liberalisation of the world economy – which have generated a sense of political and economic insecurity in Africa. National factors that have contributed to armed conflicts in Africa include discriminatory political processes and skewed resource distribution (in some cases going back to the colonial period), centralised and highly personalised forms of governance, corruption and mismanagement. While debates often conceive the causes of conflict in Africa in both national and international dimensions, in practice, attention to dealing with these conflicts is in most cases paid at the level of and in the context of the countries concerned. The consequence is that conflict resolution strategies fail to appreciate the complex

nature of disputes in Africa. The book *Phases of Conflict in Africa* aims to provide an analytical framework for conceptualising and dealing with some of these conflicts, particularly in West and Central Africa.

After some introductory remarks, the book considers the critical issue of terrorism and the way it has affected Africa. The emphasis in the discussion is on the salience of factors that serve to mobilise actors toward the use of violence. The book points out that the underlying causes of terrorism should be sought in social and political injustices and in patterns of unfairness. The war on terrorism, therefore, requires more than armed invasions. It calls for cooperation in attacking despair and indignities that spawn radical political measures and the use of violence. The book maintains that the United States' priority has been to reduce the threat of terrorism against American interests at home and abroad, but that there are costs involved and opportunities that African governments can exploit. The bottom line is that Africa should seek to strike more advantageous bargains with the United States by negotiating for the strengthening of governmental institutions to fight terrorism. The book also warns that the war against terrorism may divert American attention from economic development and democratisation to terrorism-related activities.

Phases of Conflict in Africa underscores the historical and cultural factors in the exacerbation of conflicts in Africa. It cites the case of northern Ghana that witnessed conflicts between 1981 and 1994. These conflicts, the text argues, were an extension of the failure of the post-colonial government to reconstruct citizenship in a way that balanced ethnic interests. The post-colonial government, instead, marginalised some groups, which in turn aggravated conflict between ethnic groups. Most conflicts in Africa are in part informed by traditional legacies of skewed socio-economic and political relationships.

The refugee problem in Africa is another crucial factor linked to conflicts. The text argues that conflicts do not simply spill across boundaries because of movement of refugees. Instead, conflicts arise when refugees enter a polarised situation or one that already contains the seeds of discord. In such cases, refugees create tensions by entering into new alignments or changing old ones. The cases of Tanzania and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) are used in the book to illustrate this debate. The historical polarity and movement of refugees in eastern DRC is employed to explain the tension and conflicts that have been

witnessed in that country in the recent past. In Tanzania, similar historical circumstances do not obtain and that partly explains why Tanzania has not witnessed violent conflicts involving refugees. The book also deals with the historical scope of the conflicts in the DRC since its independence, illustrating the role of both the regional and trans-national forces.

In the case of West Africa, the book discusses the Peace Agreement in Liberia and maintains that while a peace agreement can lay a foundation under which overt war may cease, it is the efforts to consolidate the peace agreement that determine whether that agreement will last or not. It is important to build on peace agreements by paying close attention to the vulnerabilities that each party brings to the negotiating table. The book also considers the question of transitional justice in Sierra Leone. Sierra Leone adopted two transitional justice policy options; a Truth Commission and a Special Court. In the recent past, countries that have come out of conflict or gross human rights abuses have increasingly shown interest in adopting a variety of policy options to deal with their past. The book cautions against embracing a 'one size fits it all' approach. It maintains the need for more policy options to make them relevant to specific contexts.

The book does well in highlighting the complex nature of most of the conflicts on the African continent. It takes in diverse methodological approaches and ideological assumptions and certainly adds to our critical thinking by providing fascinating and factual case studies. Each chapter challenges the reader to rethink the conventional, simplistic way of branding conflicts in Africa in tribal/ethnic terms. What perhaps does not come out strongly in the essays on terrorism is the debate on the role of religion in conflicts, particularly where individuals seek to legitimise barbarism in the name of belief. Religion has also worked in tandem with socio-economic factors to intensify conflicts in some parts of Africa, including northern Uganda and southern Sudan. The book too, defines conflict in broad terms of perceived incompatibility of interests or goals and/or competitions for control of scarce resources. But in the cases covered, there is little effort to distinguish between overt conflict and insidious forms of structural violence that have been witnessed in countries such as Zimbabwe, Kenya and Nigeria. Nonetheless, the book is richly relevant to contemporary readers in its ability to highlight complex debates and borrow from diverse

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sources of data. The various contributors can each stand on their own, but they also build on each other. It is a well-packaged book on some key cases of destructive conflict in Africa. It should interest both academicians and practitioners interested in the intellectual challenges, dialogues and practices around conflict in Africa and more generally.