

# African Studies Quarterly

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**Phases of Conflict in Africa. Rose Kadende-Kaiser and Paul J. Kaiser, eds. Toronto: De Sitter Publications, 2005. 184 pp.**

Africa has been afflicted by serious armed conflicts perhaps more 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 conflicts. In most cases, the underlying causes of these conflicts are closely interwoven in both national and international arenas. Among the international factors are the consequences of the Cold War and its aftermath, as well as the globalization and liberalization of the world economy, which have generated political and economic insecurity in Africa. National factors that have contributed to armed conflicts in Africa include discriminatory political processes, skewed resource distribution, centralized and highly personalized forms of governance, corruption, and mismanagement. In practice, attention to these conflicts is usually at the individual country level and in the contexts of specific countries. The consequence is that conflict resolution strategies fail to appreciate the complex, often regional, nature of conflicts in Africa. This book aims to provide an analytical framework for conceptualising and dealing with some of these conflicts, particularly in West and Central Africa.

The book initially considers the critical issue of terrorism and the way it has affected Africa. The emphasis in the discussion is on the 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 inequality. 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 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 of the dangers of the war against terrorism diverting American attention from economic development and democratisation.

This volume also 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 were an extension of the failure of the post colonial government to reconstruct citizenship in away that balanced ethnic interests. The post colonial government instead marginalized 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 into a polarized situation or one that already contains the

seeds of discord. In such cases refugees create tensions by creating new alignments or changing old ones. The cases of Tanzania and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) are used in the book to illustrate this situation. The historical polarity and movement of refugees in eastern DRC helps to explain the tension and conflicts in that country in the recent past. In Tanzania similar historical circumstances do not pertain and that partly explains why Tanzania has not witnessed violent conflicts involving refugees. The book also deals with the scope of the conflicts in the DRC since independence, illustrating the role of both the regional and trans-national forces.

In the case of West Africa, the book examines the case of 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 emerged from conflict or gross human rights abuses have increasingly shown interest in adopting a variety of policy. The book cautions against embracing a 'one size fits it all' approach. It maintains the need to tailor policy options to specific contexts.

The book does well in broadly 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 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 also defines conflict in broad terms of perceived incompatibility of interests or competitions for control of scarce resources. Yet in the cases covered, there is little effort to distinguish these from overt and structural but insidious forms of conflict 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 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 intellectual development, dialogue, and practice on conflict broadly and on Africa in particular.

Kisiangani Emmanuel  
*University of the Witwatersrand*