

Prospects for peace in Africa
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What is meant by peace?

I have been asked to talk briefly about the prospects for peace in Africa and, more specifically, Ethiopia, which are both very ambitious tasks to try to do justice to in 10 minutes.

To start I'd like to set out what I mean when I'm talking about peace.

One of the more common definitions of peace refers to the absence of war – if a society isn't involved in a war it is said to be at peace.

A more complicated but probably more accurate definition is that peace implies the absence of war, but also the general absence of violence within a society among and against people. In addition to low levels of violence, opportunities exist for everyone in that safe and secure environment to maximize their own potential and that of the society they are part of.

This is part of the thinking about the idea of human security – setting as a political priority freedom from fear and freedom from want for ordinary people versus making the priority the security of the state and the people who control it.

So positive peace is meant to describe people's general sense of physical security, as well as opportunities and processes to improve everyone's well-being within a society. Making progress implies finding solutions that provide the greatest benefits to the most people, balancing the needs and interests of those who don't benefit, and, in all of this, preventing conflicting interests from turning violent and destructive.

The forest

If we look past the predominant media images of violence in Africa and at the forest and not the individual trees, it is obvious that most of Africa is as peaceful as many other parts of the world.

In terms of the number and lethality of major wars in Africa, people who study these things see a positive trend.

Wars in Africa involving states as at least one of the parties to the conflict increased from the mid-1950s to the early 1990s, stayed steady through the 1990s and then began to decline dramatically until 2005. The Human Security Report 2009/2010 notes that these were wars of independence, struggles for control of power in the new post-colonial states, or proxy wars fuelled by the competition between the Soviets and the US and its allies.

Since 2005, when there were 14 active conflicts in Africa, the total number has remained about the same.

So far in 2011, Somalia, Sudan and Cote d'Ivoire are the most lethal, high intensity conflicts continuing in SubSaharan Africa. Another dozen continue with lower levels of violence.

It is worth noting that total numbers of conflicts rise and fall for two reasons – the starting of new conflicts and the ending of others. Major armed conflicts end by different means, either through negotiated peace agreements, ceasefires, battlefield victories or the level of violence diminishing to the point where the conflict is considered to be over.

In the past few years, a number of very lethal African conflicts that had terminated – Sierra Leone, Liberia, Angola -- did not restart. We'll see what happens in Côte d'Ivoire and Sudan, where existing peace agreements and the relative peacefulness they brought, appear to be at high risk right now.

Democracy

The trend in political freedoms in Africa is less positive, but it is not wholly negative either.

Earlier this week, Freedom House, a US-based organization that tracks the state of democracy around the world, produced its annual report for 2010.

To quote from the report:

“During the 1990s, the state of African democracy improved dramatically, with major increases in the number of Free and Partly Free¹ countries and a substantial decrease in the roster of countries designated as Not Free. Over the past decade, however, conditions have stagnated; the number of countries ranked as Not Free actually showed a slight increase, and the region as a whole registered declines in both political rights and civil liberties indicators.”

“The year 2010 featured a continued pattern of volatility and decline for sub-Saharan Africa. There was more backsliding than improvement, though gains were noted in several of the region's more important countries.”

“The most notable improvement in 2010 took place in Guinea, which emerged from a murderous military dictatorship and held successful elections amid enhanced observance of freedom of speech and other civil liberties. Also making gains during the year were Kenya, Nigeria, Tanzania, and the territory of Somaliland,” Freedom House says.

“The most significant setback occurred in Ethiopia, which declined from Partly Free to Not Free. Ethiopia has experienced steady, incremental declines in recent years, and in 2010 the pace of erosion accelerated due to massive repression that accompanied national elections. Another major

¹ According to Freedom House, “A Free country is one where there is broad scope for open political competition, a climate of respect for civil liberties, significant independent civic life, and independent media. A Partly Free country is one in which there is limited respect for political rights and civil liberties. Partly Free states frequently suffer from an environment of corruption, weak rule of law, ethnic and religious strife, and often a setting in which a single political party enjoys dominance despite the façade of limited pluralism. A Not Free country is one where basic political rights are absent, and basic civil liberties are widely and systematically denied.

decline occurred in Côte d'Ivoire, where at year's end President Laurent Gbagbo refused to give up power despite having lost the long-delayed presidential election..."

Economic growth

Another factor that is considered to be a major influence in creating the conditions for peace is economic growth.

Jakkie Cilliers, who heads the Institute for Strategic Studies in South Africa, was in Ottawa just a few weeks ago talking about peace and conflict trends in general and in Africa in particular.

One of his main points was that: The most powerful predictors of civil conflicts are weak economic growth and volatile low incomes. A country whose people have an average annual per capita income of \$250 has a 15 per cent likelihood of internal conflict over five years, which is many times greater than the 1 per cent risk to an economy with a \$5,000 average annual per capita income.

There is quite a bit of consensus on the reasons for the decline in the number of major conflicts in SubSaharan Africa, including the fact that that part of the continent is showing positive economic growth of about 5 per cent a year.

Some of the additional reasons given by Cilliers and others are that individual governments are becoming more effective at governing, the international community is getting more engaged, and African governments and the African Union are showing more leadership, specifically in conflict prevention and peacemaking.

Diplomatic and military interventions to end conflict or try to prevent it are now the rule in Africa, not the exception. We can see that today in Sudan, Côte d'Ivoire, Kenya, Somalia and other flashpoints, with the involvement of the AU, IGAD or ECOWAS and African statesmen like Thabo Mbeki.

And those interventions are justified against a set of international and African norms that didn't exist 20 years ago.

To summarize, I think we are witnessing a number of positive developments and trends in terms of preventing and responding to violent conflict in Africa, but it's also very obvious that millions of Africans are still directly affected by war, by predatory or ineffective governments, political repression, as well as the effects of poverty, unemployment and the lack of education.

This indicates to me that much work needs to be done to help build the conditions for political peace and physical security and that the way to do that involves not just political engagement and action but also economic and social development.

Ethiopia

My personal opinion is that the prospects for peace in Ethiopia are very cloudy -- I am talking about both the absence of war and the more complicated definition that links physical safety and well-being with political and economic opportunities and freedoms.

Historically, since the Second World War, Ethiopia has been engaged in more major armed conflicts internally and across its borders than any other country in Africa. An estimated 250,000 Ethiopians died in the civil war between 1974 and 1991. The Ethiopian-Eritrean War is considered to be the most deadly conventional war fought between two African states, whether you accept the low estimate of 70,000 casualties on both sides or the higher estimate of 123,000 to 125,000.

The border with Eritrea remains a potential flashpoint, the civil war in Somalia and the strength of Somali Islamists factions are considered major threats to Ethiopia, low-level fighting takes place sporadically between the government and Ogadeni and Oromia insurgents.

Despite these military threats, I don't think the Ethiopian state is in any existential danger, given its military capacities. The principal danger, I would think, is being provoked into another reactive, costly war with Eritrea, or further military actions in Somalia against Islamist groups – costly in terms of lives on all sides but also of the country's economic resources.

Another worrisome possibility is the referendum process and expected separation of Southern Sudan generating either a North-South resumption of war that draws in Ethiopia and others or a violent political upheaval or series of upheavals in the northern remnant of Sudan that further destabilizes the whole region.

But even if this dangerous regional neighbourhood remains relatively calm, it would seem that Ethiopia will still be at a high risk of continuing internal conflict coming from different sources.

In 2009 the International Crisis Group warned that, "Without genuine multi-party democracy, the tensions and pressures in Ethiopia's politics will only grow, greatly increasing the possibility of a violent eruption that would destabilize the country and the region." (Ethiopia: Ethnic Federalism and its Discontents, ICG , September 2009)

That was before the May 2010 elections, in which Ethiopia's political opposition was virtually swept out of the House of People's Representative's national parliamentary arena and regional State Councils. Ethiopia now lacks an effective opposition with a public institutional platform for expressing alternative views, holding the government to account for its actions or inaction, and presumably presenting constructive political, economic and social options.

Without a credible forum for open dialogue at the national or state levels, the country is missing what many consider essential mechanisms for national consensus-building and political problem-solving, as well as a safety valve to let off political and social pressure.

Manipulating election processes and suppressing legitimate dissent through the widespread use of state-sanctioned violence by the security apparatus, rather than reducing risks to those in power, I would think increase them.

Two other possible risks of violence I would note are religious competition and confrontations involving Christians, Muslims and adherents of African religions or between different Christian and Muslim sects, and public unrest over food scarcities and price increases of other basic goods.

All of these conflict issues play out against the background of Ethiopia's ethnic diversity, deep poverty, vulnerability to food scarcities and other factors.

On the positive side, they are also affected by the larger positive trends taking place in Africa – steady economic growth and increasing foreign investment, international and African peer pressure and the establishment of mechanisms to prevent conflict, the momentum towards increased democratization.

Another positive element is that within Ethiopia the standards and institutional frameworks for the functioning of a free democracy and progress towards real human security are in place.

Lastly, I'd suggest that there have been and will continue to be within Ethiopia and outside the country people of good faith – opponents and supporters of the Meles government – who don't buy into the inevitability of living with the threats of violent, destructive upheaval and what amounts to democratic paralysis within the country.

The issue is how to bring Ethiopians into a purposeful national dialogue that addresses how to open up the road to a secure future for all.

Back in the 1970s political theorist Hannah Arendt wrote a short book titled, *On Violence*.

In it she says that, "Predictions of the future are never anything but predictions of present automatic processes, that is of occurrences that are likely to come to pass if men (and women) do not act and if nothing unexpected happens."

I think one prediction that is safe to make is that Ethiopians can expect the unexpected to happen and that Ethiopian men and women will continue to act to shape their futures.