The paradox of silencing the guns and increasing conflicts: A critical appraisal of the role of the African Union institutions

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This paper aims to highlight the reasons behind the escalating conflicts in Africa in recent years. Through a desk review of the literature on ongoing conflicts, the paper attempts to unpack the paradox surrounding the goal of silencing guns in Africa by the year 2020 and beyond. The objective is to uncover the reasons causing and contributing to conflicts in Africa. The study concludes that the sources of violent conflicts and their consequences are diverse and should be understood as such. Finally, the paper suggests policy recommendations, emphasizing the need for vigorous empirical research to understand and address these conflicts.

Key words: Africa Union, conflicts, silencing the guns, military coups.

INTRODUCTION

This paper argues that conflict is more pervasive than ever in Africa, despite the African Union (AU) declaring 2020 as the 'year of silencing guns' (AU, 2013). It is noteworthy that instead of subsiding, conflicts are intensifying in the post-2020 decade, including in Ethiopia, the seat of the continental organization. For instance, reported data indicates a significant increase from 10,978 battle-related deaths in 2020 to 19,325 in 2021 (Strand and Hegre, 2021). This more than nine thousand increase in just one year illustrates the escalating nature of conflict on the continent. The sharp rise underscores how the collective aspiration of African leaders is not materializing, and how the AU is failing to prevent these conflicts, as stated in its 2013 declaration of 2020 as the 'year of silencing the guns.' More evidence demonstrating the AU's failure to uphold its commitments will be presented later in this paper.

As mentioned earlier, this paper contributes to unraveling the paradox, a pursuit that should be undertaken vigorously by academics and research scholars both within and outside Africa. The paper raises questions about why achieving peace on the continent has become practically challenging, aiming to understand the nature of the AU and its institutions, which are only as strong as the collective strength or weakness of its member states.
While conflicts in general and African conflicts in particular, are longstanding social phenomena, this paper investigates the multiple factors triggering them on the continent. The author posits that a single factor is not solely responsible for conflicts in Africa; rather, their solutions require addressing various root causes. Accordingly, the paper proposes concrete recommendations for further research.

From the outset, it is crucial to acknowledge that the underlying causes of conflicts in Africa are diverse, encompassing economic, social, political, and environmental factors (Nathan, 2004). Some conflicts, such as those in Somalia, are protracted, while others, like the situation in Sudan, represent the resurgence of formerly unresolved conflicts. Violent struggles permeate almost all regions of Africa – North, Central, West, East, Horn, and Southern regions. Almost all countries in Africa are engulfed in armed conflicts. Ongoing conflicts are witnessed in Libya, Egypt, Sudan, Central African Republic, Chad, Niger, Nigeria, Mali, Burkina Faso, Cote d’Ivoire, Cameroon, DRC, Burundi, Mozambique, Ethiopia, Somalia, South Sudan, etc. The long-simmering but frozen conflict in Uganda seems to be dormant for now, but it persists as long as the Lord’s Resistance Army (France24, 2021) hides or foments crisis in neighboring countries, even though Uganda, the pearl of Africa, enjoys relative peace.

METHODOLOGY

The paper is based on a review of the literature and secondary data. The figures are largely derived from sources available on the World Wide Web. Accordingly, the analysis employs a descriptive, textual, and contextual approach. It takes on a reflective stance while relying on a systematic analysis. The study aims to inspire future research into why the AU fails to maintain peace on the continent, contrary to its declaration for the 2020s and beyond as a time of a conflict-free continent. Peace and conflict researchers, both in Africa and elsewhere, will need to contribute to understanding the comprehensive causes of active and latent conflicts in Africa, as they undermine the developmental and democratic gains made in the 1990 and 2000s.

The data covers a time span extending from the 1970s and 1980s for some conflicts, but the majority of information refers to the 2020s. Published and unpublished sources, as well as personal observations, are utilized to support the argument. In the concluding part, policy recommendations are provided for the African Union to address the continent’s problems through the oft-proclaimed African solutions.

DISCUSSION

A study posted on Relief Web distinguishes between state and non-state conflicts and defines the terms related to conflict as follows: "State-based conflict: A contested incompatibility over government and/or territory, with at least one party being a state, and involving the use of armed force that results in at least 25 battle-related deaths within a calendar year" (Palik et al., 2022). It adds that "Non-state conflict: The use of armed force between organized groups, none of which is the government of a state that results in at least 25 annual battle-related deaths" (Ibid). Moreover, "Battle-related deaths are defined as "Fatalities, including civilian losses, caused by warring parties and that can be directly related to combat" (Palik et al., 2022). These conceptions are used throughout this paper since they are important.

Violent conflicts in Africa, the declaration of 2020 as the year of silencing the guns

Conflicts are on the rise in Africa despite the AU’s intentions to end deadly conflicts. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI, 2020), 'There were at least 15 countries with active armed conflicts in sub-Saharan Africa in 2019: Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cameroon, the Central African Republic (CAR), Chad, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Ethiopia, Kenya, Mali, Mozambique, Niger, Nigeria, Somalia, South Sudan, and Sudan.' Ranking countries by the deadliness of conflicts is extremely difficult, as these countries fluctuate in their positions over time. The issue, therefore, is not so much about numbers but the resurgence of conflicts in Africa after the region was expected to be silencing the guns. That is where the paradox lies. As the Uppsala Center for Peace and Development observed, 'Albeit most conflicts are small, the number of wars increased from five in 2021 to eight in 2022. Conflicts causing at least 1,000 battle-related deaths during one calendar year are considered wars' (UCPD, 2023).

As indicated earlier, conflicts are triggered by numerous factors in Africa, as well as elsewhere. Some studies suggest that African conflicts result from poverty and a youthful population. Resources are distributed unequally and often skewed (The Conversation, 2017). This is a resources-driven conflict. Other sources of African conflict include religious or cultural factors, as seen in the cases of Boko Haram and Al Shabab, African variants of IS in West and North Africa, and in Mozambique. State failure and ethnicity-based governance, which share features with resource, religious, and cultural conflicts, plague different parts of Africa at different times. Conflicts in Ethiopia, Sudan, and South Sudan largely fall into this category. Another form of conflict, both historical and recurrent, refers to conflicts related to coups or military takeovers. This study delves into each of the reasons for pervasive conflicts in Africa in the following.

In examining the broken promises of the AU, especially after adopting the year 2020 as the Year of Silencing the Guns, this paper discusses the major factors of severe conflicts in Africa. This is followed by outlining the consequences of these conflicts. The author believes that such a holistic approach is needed to understand the dynamics of conflict in Africa in order to suggest
meaningful policy recommendations.

**Resource-driven conflicts**

The continent of Africa is endowed with rich natural resources (Ibrahim et al., 2014). These have been amply documented in various papers, books, periodicals, and magazines (Mazrui, 1980). Africa is endowed with rich natural resources: oil, gold, platinum, hydrological resources, land, and favorable agro-climatic conditions (Olanrewaju et al., 2020). These resources, however, are owned and exploited by the few ruling elites in collaboration with foreign transnational corporations from the West and the East—the latter represented by Japan, China, India, Taiwan, Korea, Turkey, and even the Gulf countries like Iran, UAE, and Saudi Arabia. Similarly, they are also exploited directly by the few remaining whites and their African allies, largely, the regimes in power.

In effect, though richly endowed with diverse resources, mishandling, corruption, and abuse of power, Africa remains sustainably poor and because of this, conflicts flare up everywhere. Resource conflicts range from minor cattle rustling to major internal wars that last for decades. Researchers often cite Nigeria, South Sudan, Sudan, and DRC when it comes to resources as bedrocks of conflicts in Africa. Waangari (2009), Collier (2008), and others in their respective analysis mention several examples of historical and current conflicts triggered by abundant resources.

**Religious/cultural conflicts**

Religious conflicts loom larger in many parts of Africa (Kouladoum et al., 2023). Researchers note that there is a dearth of information on interfaith conflicts in Africa (Basedau and Schaefer-Kenhert, 2019). Huntington (1996) argues that cultural and religious aspects of life are the constant elements of conflict in the world after the Cold War. Though this assertion is a grossly exaggerated thesis and does not explain the whole phenomena of conflicts in the post-Cold War international system, it holds true for certain components of conflicts in Africa.

The countries in post-colonial Africa that are involved in religious or cultural conflicts include Somalia, South Sudan (during the liberation struggle from the predominantly Islamic Sudan), Central African Republic, Nigeria, Mali, the Maghreb African states, and Mozambique. In some of these countries, religious and cultural clashes happen between two differing groups, say between Islam and Christian communities as in CAR, South Sudan, Nigeria, and Mozambique; whereas in others, conflict takes the form of intra-religious or intra-cultural groups as in the case of Somalia and north Africa where conflicts occur between similar cultural or religious groups. Under circumstances, many factors overlap to create and sustain a conflict.

In other words, instead of religious or cultural intolerance or lack of accommodation, resources, power, and political differences often come into play. That is why it is difficult to single out sources of conflicts in the region.

**State failure and conflicts**

According to the Global State Fragility Index, state failure means state fragility as measured by four comprehensive indicators: social, economic, political, and social cohesion. It is “based on a conflict assessment framework” (Fragile States Index, 2023). State failure has several manifestations. It can be related to a lack of good governance, corruption, gender discrimination, or inability to administer justice in a country. In a random selection of 25 countries from the Fund for peace index of state fragility, 18 countries (72%) belong to Africa. This is extremely high, and almost all these countries are in one form of conflict or another. Some of the conflicts are devastating, claiming the lives of millions of people, and often protracted. Positions in the index change every year as countries move up or down depending on conflicts occurring in their jurisdictions. For example, Sudan, Ethiopia, and Niger could come forward when the 2024 fragility index is prepared (Table 1).

**Military coups**

Military coups are credible sources of conflict. The reason is that military coups are unconstitutional, anti-establishment, and often characterized by political instability. The African Union categorically condemns coups and violent change of government. Article 4 (p) of the Constitutive Act, provides the legal framework for the condemnation and rejection of unconstitutional change of government. This is also articulated in both national constitutions and regional treaties. However, recent events of rising coups, notably in Western Africa, indicate that the continent is sliding dangerously backwards, compromising gains in the peaceful though often troubled transition of power. The reasons for these coups are diverse and include worsening living conditions, longevity in power, economic stagnation in respective countries, and external domination as well as exploitation of a nation’s resources by foreign companies without necessarily creating employment opportunities (Table 2).

Historical and contemporary military coups have not only triggered conflicts but also projected an image of the continent as lawless, undemocratic, and chaotic. These perceptions chase away investors, foster poverty, and create the necessary conditions for further instability in the countries where they occur. The issue has been plaguing the region for decades now and is reversing the slight gains of the post-Cold War Africa that was on the path to
Table 1. African countries with scores of fragilities.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Total index</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Somalia</td>
<td>1st</td>
<td>111.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Sudan</td>
<td>3rd</td>
<td>108.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DRC</td>
<td>4th</td>
<td>108.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sudan</td>
<td>7th</td>
<td>106.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CAR</td>
<td>8th</td>
<td>105.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chad</td>
<td>9th</td>
<td>104.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethiopia</td>
<td>11th</td>
<td>100.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mali</td>
<td>13th</td>
<td>099.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guinea</td>
<td>14th</td>
<td>098.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nigeria</td>
<td>15th</td>
<td>098.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zimbabwe</td>
<td>16th</td>
<td>096.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Libya</td>
<td>17th</td>
<td>096.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eritrea</td>
<td>19th</td>
<td>094.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burundi</td>
<td>20th</td>
<td>094.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burkina Faso</td>
<td>21st</td>
<td>094.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mozambique</td>
<td>21st</td>
<td>094.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cameroon</td>
<td>21st</td>
<td>094.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Niger</td>
<td>24th</td>
<td>093.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uganda</td>
<td>26th</td>
<td>091.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Excerpted from the Global Fragility Index.

Table 2. Military coups.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Coup attempts</th>
<th>Successful</th>
<th>Failed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Africa</td>
<td>214</td>
<td>106</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latin America</td>
<td>146</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle East</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Europe</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Asia</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Global</td>
<td>486</td>
<td>242</td>
<td>244</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: VoA Africa (2022), coups in Africa.

democracy and socio-economic recovery. Although Africa is not unique in coups, the increasing number of military takeovers of power in recent years is alarming in the region that has explicitly put the problem in its legal instruments and policy documents. One most plausible reason could be that the rules and regulations are endorsed by the Heads of State and Government, some of whom stay in power for an indefinite period of time until pushed out by coups.

Consequences of conflicts

Death and destruction

A study by Fact Check Africa indicated that in 2015, more than 8000 people died in conflicts, with 90% of these deaths attributed to ACLED (2015). The Human Rights Watch Report of 2023 stated that deadly conflicts took place in 15 countries, including the Democratic Republic of Congo, Cameroon, Ethiopia, Mozambique, Mali, Burkina Faso, and South Sudan, in the preceding year (HRW, 2023). Millions of lives have perished, and social, economic, natural, and cultural properties, as well as infrastructure, have been destroyed by these conflicts involving government forces and their opponents. According to data from Uppsala University-based UCDP (2023), “At least 237,000 people died in organized violence in 2022.” This figure is reported to be 93% higher than the 2021 figure. In Western Africa alone, consisting of Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso, death rates accounted for 9000 deaths (VoA Africa, 2022).

In a few countries like Ethiopia and Somalia, conflict is raging, causing death, injury, displacement, and
destruction of social, cultural, and environmental infrastructure. Conflicts not only impact the present means of survival but also jeopardize the future of generations. In these countries, conflicts continue to affect communities, occurring across regions, either simultaneously or one after the other, with the impact reverberating across the whole of society. The shocks would undoubtedly be felt for years to come. The image of the AU is already darkened as it is seen doing little despite its endeavors to broker peace, as in the case of Ethiopia, where the government and the TPLF were engaged in a destructive civil war considered one of the deadliest in the recent history of the continent.

The conflict in Sudan, which merits the designation of a military coup and an intra-commanders’ war, has devastated the country. The capital, Khartoum, continues to be shattered and looted by the very soldiers who were supposed to protect it from external aggressors. The reconstruction cost would be too gigantic even though peace were to come back; nobody knows when. Here too, the AU appears to be powerless. Most of the negotiation efforts are made by outsiders who also harbor clandestine or ulterior motives. Unfortunately, this seems to be the fate of Africa everywhere once conflict breaks out.

**Displacement**

Migration and population movement are unstoppable human phenomena, continuing unabated due to various factors such as conflict, climate change, poverty, unemployment, and lack of opportunities. This is a recurring theme throughout human history and is a defining aspect of the world’s cultural geography. When we examine individual countries, numerous cases come to light. For instance, nearly 1 million people are displaced in Mozambique; 4 million are internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Ethiopia, and almost 2 million in Burkina Faso, all due to conflicts between the government and Islamist groups, which reportedly control about 40% of the country.

Recent studies by the South Africa-based African Center for Strategic Studies (ACSS) reveal that 32 million Africans are forcibly displaced by conflict and repression (ACSS, 2021). The study further identifies 6 million forcibly displaced individuals from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), 4 million from South Sudan, 3.3 million from Nigeria, and 2.5 million from Sudan (comprising both IDPs and refugees). These countries, along with others in the region, serve as both sources and destinations of refugees and IDPs. According to UNHCR (2022), about 7 million refugees remain displaced, with 4.7 million belonging to the Eastern and Horn of Africa as well as the Great Lakes region.

As of 2022, African countries with the largest number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) include DRC with 10,541, Sudan with 10,553, Nigeria with 10,283, Somalia with 2.968, Ethiopia with 2.730, Burkina Faso with 1,882, South Sudan with 1,475, Mozambique with 1,029, Cameroon with 989, and the Central African Republic (CAR) with 619. In 2021, Africa produced almost 15 million IDPs, with 2.5 million categorized as environmental refugees, constituting about 80% of the global figure for the year (IDMC, 2022). The same source highlights five standout countries, including Ethiopia (5.1 million due to conflict and 240,000 due to natural disasters), DRC (2.7 million and 880,000, respectively), South Sudan (429,000 due to conflict and 506,000 due to natural disasters), Somalia (549,000), and Burkina Faso (680,000, all due to conflict).

**Further marginalization/ poverty**

Available studies on conflict and its implications on poverty confirm that they reinforce each other (Rohwerder, 2014; Kebede, 2000). Okunlola and Okafi (2022) emphasize that conflict causes poverty, though they reject the argument that poverty causes conflict. In most contexts, this assertion doesn’t hold true, primarily because conflict, especially one that is destructive, fatal, and involves multiple actors, results in a loss of interest in peace and stability. It also leads to an increased number of unemployed young people who can initiate and sustain conflict both due to a lack of opportunities and as a means of escaping poverty (Kebede, 2000). Studies from the International Monetary Fund (Fang et al, 2020) also confirm that the rising conflicts in Africa have caused declines in growth, which can be viewed as an intensification of poverty.

**Managing African conflicts**

**AU institutions and normative enablers to manage conflicts**

In 2013, the African Union (AU) Assembly of Heads of State and Government made a pledge ‘not to bequeath the burden of conflict to the next generation of Africans and undertake to end all wars by 2020.’ Silencing the Guns in Africa is one of the flagship initiatives of the AU’s Agenda 2063, aiming to achieve an integrated, prosperous, and peaceful Africa driven by its own citizens and representing a dynamic force in the international arena. This agenda is strongly linked with the UN’s 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The AU Summit, held on February 9 and 10, 2020, adopted “Silencing the Guns: Creating Conducive Conditions for Africa’s Development” (AU, 2013) as the year’s AU theme.

As noted by Mlambo (2021), the notion of declaring the goal of silencing the guns was recognition of the prevalence of deadly conflicts in Africa. Most agree that conflict remains one of the biggest challenges facing Africa. As emphasized by Africa Renewal, “The AU also sees conflict as one of the biggest impediments to the implementation of Agenda 2063” (Zipporah, 2019). In
terms of institutional architecture, the African Union has laid the foundations for the peaceful resolution of conflicts. This includes the General Assembly, the Political Affairs, Peace and Security Department, the Pan-African Parliament (PAP), and the Conflict Management and Resolution Unit. Article 3 (f) of the Constitutive Act, establishing PAP, states that one of the organization’s objectives is to “promote peace, security, and stability” (AU, 2019).

The PAP has established a standing committee titled Cooperation, International Relations, Peace and Stability, which, among other things, aims to “(d) assist the Parliament in efforts of prevention and resolution” (PAP, 2002). The Peace and Security Department was established with objectives such as implementing the African Common Defense and Security Policy (CADSP), implementing the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA), supporting conflict prevention, management, and resolution efforts, promoting structural conflict prevention programs, including through the African Union Border Management Program (AUBP), implementing the AU policy framework on post-conflict reconstruction and development (PCRD), and coordinating, harmonizing, and promoting peace and security programs in Africa, working with Regional Economic Communities (RECs), Regional Mechanisms (RMs) for conflict prevention, management, and resolution, and international partners (AU, ND).

The stated objective of silencing the guns by the year 2020 includes “Ending all wars, civil conflicts, gender-based violence, violent conflicts, and preventing genocide in the continent by 2020” (AU, 2013). The UN Secretary-General, Antonio Guterres, commended the AU by stating that “Africa’s challenges can only be solved by African leadership. The African Union is commended for making silencing the Guns such a prominent part of its work for 2020” (Zipporah, 2019).

What explains AU’s failure in silencing the guns?

The AU finds itself in a quagmire situation. On the one hand, it aspires to solve African conflicts and turn the guns into “plows”. This is euphemistically called African solutions to African problems. Of course, it has helped resolve some of the challenges faced by the continent. For example, the AU addressed one of Ethiopia’s deadly clashes, as noted earlier, in the northern part of the country, after two years of bitter fighting between TPLF and the Ethiopian government. It also led to the negotiations, tough unsuccessful yet, of the Great Renaissance Dam (GERD) involving Egypt, Ethiopia, and Sudan. Ethiopia stressed the need for AU’s leadership, and this was also supported by the UN Security Council despite Egypt’s insistence that the case be seen by the UNSC as a security threat. Similar efforts of the AU are witnessed here and there including sanctions against military coups referring to the provisions of the Constitutive Act which condemns unconstitutional change of government.

Moreover, the AU provides opportunities or platforms for dialogue and deliberations to pass policies and strategies that have the possibilities of integration, coherence, and forging unity. These integrative and consensus-building functions are very important if exploited properly. Convoking power is essential for promoting deliberative democracy through stakeholder participation. In the long run this is expected to pave the way for popular engagement, a critical aspect of democratization.

On the other hand, however, the AU fails to make progress on many fronts, chief among them in silencing the guns, despite this being one of the declared projects of Agenda 2063, in fact, to be achieved by 2020. The testimony is the increasing of conflicts in Africa after the declaration, in 2013, of the year 2020 the year of peace, stability, and prosperity, the year of silencing the guns. As the discussions in the foregoing sections show, the continent has witnessed death, destruction, mass migration as well and tremendous internal displacement. The rise in military takeover of governments in many countries is an indication of the prevailing ills of the Africa society.

The mushrooming conflicts are driven out of proportion even though the AU denounces and suspends the membership of coup countries. Coups usually remove ‘elected’ regimes, often suspend constitutions and parliaments, and curtail the fundamental rights of citizens, including the right to life, the right to express oneself, and the right to assemble. However, coup leaders also argue that these rights have been already compromised under long-reigning regimes. It is very interesting to note that Africa, particularly the West and Central regions, have experienced nine coups since 2020. As this paper is being drafted another coup was reported in Gabon just days after the incumbent president declared that he won the election held a few days ago.

Some of the reasons explaining the AU’s failure to prevent coups and conflicts can be related to one or more of the following factors. First are the double standards contained in the Constitutive Act itself. The legal provision preventing an unconstitutional change of government is adopted by the General Assembly. This is fine as a tool. However, most of the leaders stay too long in power by rigging elections, changing constitutions, or not having a functioning constitution at all. Then they want the country to remain under their authoritarian rule, often using the army to weaken the opposition and stay on the presidential throne indefinitely. The AU has de-legislated unlawful change of governments, but it has not put a cap on term limits for a president/prime minister, only bemoaning when that power is grabbed by the army.

Here is where the biggest paradox lies. Second and most important is that Africa is rich in resources; however, more than 70% of its people live in abject poverty. Because the continent is both rich and poor, the AU is unable to finance itself and run Africa’s own activities. Examples are
plenty. The AU receives more than 70% of its budget from the EU and its bilateral/multilateral donors give money on the basis of projects. Donor money is tax-payer money, and it does not come for free. It must meet certain conditions; the AU’s degree of freedom is proportional to the funds received. Some of the projects that do not meet donor requirements do not attract funding.

The other examples include the Office complexes themselves. The AU receives gifts from countries. The General Assembly meets in a building donated by China. There are lots of controversies surrounding this gift, including spying devices installed in the structures. This is often vehemently denied by China as an unfounded allegation, but the issue still remains. Apparently, China is not accused of fomenting conflicts in Africa. Rather, it does this by supporting long-reigning regimes and thereby triggering anger and dissent which feeds conflicts on the continent. It is an indirect contribution that China fuels conflicts at par with Western colonialists. The African Union Security Council seats at a building constructed by Germany and nobody knows why that country has done this. Moreover, Germany finances Africa’s Better Border Management Project. Why? This and many questions remained unanswered but are believed to weaken the AU’s capacity to contain conflicts in the continent. This must, however, be substantiated through empirical research, one of the motives of this paper.

CONCLUSION

The discussion in the paper highlights the escalating conflicts in Africa, particularly after the declaration of 2020 as the Year of Silencing the Guns. The acknowledgment is made that the root causes of these conflicts are diverse, encompassing both internal and external sources. The paradox lies in the fact that at the time earmarked for transforming weapons into tools for peace, the continent is experiencing highly volatile conflicts. Consequently, hundreds of thousands have perished, and as various sources cited earlier indicate, millions of people have been displaced, pushed into refugee camps, or crossed borders as migrants due to conflicts. Additionally, millions are subjected to human rights violations and cultural, as well as religious, sacrifices. As discussed, these conflicts, resulting in death, destruction, and migration of millions, stem from poverty, inappropriate resource exploitation, the persistence of autocratic leaders leading to military coups, cultural and religious differences, and the politicization of ethnic disparities. Without addressing these social, economic, and political grievances, commitments to building peace will remain a perplexing paradox indefinitely.

The enigma surrounding the declaration to silence the guns in Africa can be partly explained by the prevalence of undemocratic rulers, often ascending to power through military takeovers or orchestrated, largely rigged elections. These leaders may adopt policies and strategies for peace and stability in Africa, but the implementation of various provisions in the AU charters, protocols, and policies becomes challenging. For instance, the provision on unconstitutional changes of government in the Constitutive Act of the AU becomes an empty phrase in the face of increasing coups in contemporary Africa.

It can be concluded that unless the AU revitalizes itself and fulfills its promises, the continent will persist as a conflict-plagued region. This poses a challenge not only for Africa but for the world, despite Africa’s intent to control the turmoil and even contribute to peace in other regions.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

It is essential to build peace and settle conflicts in Africa for the continent to achieve and help its member states achieve the sustainable development goals as well as its own Agenda 2063. Peace is a foundation for durable economic development and social transformation. For this reason, it is important to understand and address the root causes of conflicts in Africa. In view of the discussion in this paper, the following recommendations are suggested:

1. The AU should commission concrete studies to assess the number and extent of conflicts in the region, focusing particularly on the years following the adoption of 2020 as the Year of Silencing the Guns. The study’s coverage should extend beyond 2020 to address the growing conflicts.
2. The AU needs to understand the increasing prevalence of military coups, despite the prohibitions outlined in the Constitutive Act and subsequent declarations, decisions, policies, and strategies against unconstitutional changes in government. It is crucial to identify why sanctions and suspension of a country from membership have not deterred military coups. The AU should consider redefining the concept of unconstitutional regime change, especially in cases where regimes stay in power for extended periods through rigged elections, manipulation of electoral commissions, narrowing political spaces, or control of the media by incumbent parties. Addressing these issues requires institutional transformation, a new way of thinking, and transformational leadership within the AU and its major organs, especially the PAP, the Peace and Security Department, and the Commission Secretariat.
3. The AU needs to conduct a declaration and policy audit exercise. Passing resolutions and making new commitments is insufficient without ensuring their translation into action. The AU Legal Affairs should advise leaders in this regard. The audit should begin from 1963, examining similar policies adopted and the reasons for their ineffectiveness. If some legislations have proven effective, the audit should investigate what works and why.
4. The AU and its regional and international partners should realize that the broader ramifications (poverty, displacement, climate change, death, and destruction,
among others) of the rising conflict, including military coups, would undermine the continent’s development if previous and existing political commitments remain unimplemented for lack of resources in a predictable and consistent manner. This requires the AU to make resource mobilization, especially internal resources, one of the key priorities and the international community to discharge its responsibilities if the AU remains relevant to prevent conflicts and maintain peace and stability on the continent and around the world.

These recommendations call for rigorous academic research by individuals, institutions, and stakeholders in a holistic and policy-relevant way. They also should look backward and forward with the future of peace, stability, and development of the region in mind.

LIMITATION

This paper has three significant limitations. First, it focuses on the challenges faced by Africa and talks largely about the AU as a continental organization that was expected to do more to prevent conflicts or settle them as they arise but couldn’t do so for the reasons outlined in the relevant sections. Therefore, the paper largely concerns itself with conflicts in the regions. Implicitly, the author believes that resolving African conflicts is a contribution to global stability. Second, as suggested in the materials and methods section, it is not an empirical study. Rather, it is based on secondary sources. Though contemporary African conflicts are mind boggling and call for both empirical and theoretical analyses, time and resources could not allow this author to go beyond. So, this paper should be understood that way. Third, the study does not deal with external factors though they are very useful. However, despite these limitations, the paper would contribute to informed policy and decision-making by the AU and other regional bodies.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The author has not declared any conflict of interests.

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