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UNDERSTANDING THE CONFLICTS IN THE GREAT LAKES REGION: AN OVERVIEW

Anastase SHYAKA

Abstract: *This paper discusses factors underlying internal and international conflicts in the Great Lakes Region of Africa. The systematic analysis of causal factors focuses on the following: Colonial legacy; inadequate political systems and political parties' cleavages; poor management of transitions and foreign negative interferences. It argues that the combination of these factors has led to the recurrence of conflicts and ineffectiveness of peace building instruments. The paper argues further that for sustaining peace and security in the region, there is a need for a paradigm shift in internal and international politics: First, local peace imperatives must prevail over geopolitical interests of foreign powers. Second, peaceful political change in the Great Lakes countries should be understood as an important strategy for national and regional security architecture.*

Sommaire : *Cet article porte sur l'analyse des conflits internes et internationaux dans la Région des Grands Lacs à travers les facteurs qui en servent de lit. Ces facteurs, qu'ils soient de génération ou d'intensification des conflits ou encore d'inhibition des accords et initiatives de paix, s'articulent autour des éléments suivants : l'héritage colonial, les systèmes politiques et les clivages partisans inadéquats, la mauvaise gestion des transitions et les influences extérieures conflictogènes. Pour construire durablement la paix et la sécurité dans la région, l'auteur propose un changement de paradigme dans les pratiques nationales et internationales. D'abord, il faut que les impératifs de paix locale priment sur les intérêts géopolitiques des acteurs et puissances extérieurs. Ensuite, il faut que l'alternance politique pacifique dans les pays de la région soit comprise et admise comme une importante stratégie de stabilisation de ces pays et de toute la région.*

Introduction

The Great Lakes region can be and is defined in various ways. Sometimes it is (and was) used to refer to former Belgian colonies: Rwanda, Burundi and Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). On the other hand, the United Nations /African Union International Conference on the Great Lakes Region extended that concept to eleven countries: Angola, Burundi, Central Africa Republic, Congo Republic, DRC, Kenya, Rwanda, Sudan, Tanzania, Uganda and Zambia. Herein we will only look at four countries, namely: Burundi, D.R. Congo, Rwanda and Uganda.

These countries are among the African states, which have been most affected by violent and armed conflicts in the last few decades. All the theories that explain sources of conflict are applicable to each of the four countries under study. Those conflict theories are the following: political theory (competition for the control of state power); human needs theory (people are fighting in search for better living conditions); relational theory

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(conflicts are caused by identity related problems) and transformational theory (demand for change against resistance to change).

Elements that characterise conflicts in these countries include the excessive politicisation of identity, the high degree of internationalisation of the conflicts and extensive civilian involvement in the perpetration of atrocities. Although violent conflicts have erupted in this region mostly in the postcolonial era, the period of colonialism has been decisive in structuring their root causes.

1. The Colonial Legacy

Destructive consequences of colonialism spring from the fact that Africa lost power (Rodney, 1982). With power, African societies also lost capacity to maintain, to generate or to bargain for positive peace internally and externally. The Great Lakes Region was at the crossroads of three colonial zones of interests and influences: those of Germany, Belgium and Great Britain. The colonial legacy as a background to the conflicts in the Great Lakes can be studied from many aspects. These conflict-generating factors originating from colonialism can be grouped into three structures: **political avenue, ideological avenue and artificiality of state borders**.

The colonial political aspect as a conflict-generating factor refers to the politics of "divide and rule" and the oppressive indirect rule that was practised by colonial masters. It refers also to the delegitimization of traditional structures of confidence and peace building and politicization of ethnicity. However, the biggest role of colonial regimes in handicapping their colonies was their involvement (direct or indirect) in physical killing of the leaders who could have become the founding Fathers of their independent nations. This applies specifically to Rwanda, Burundi and DRC (then Congo Leopoldville) which literally became political orphans in the wave of decolonization.

King Mutara III RUDAHIGWA of Rwanda was killed on 25th July, 1959 and his death was followed only three months later by the so-called "social Revolution", which laid foundations for the Hutu- Tutsi conflict in Rwanda. The Prime Minister Emery Patrice LUMUMBA of the Congo was killed in January 1961 and this led to chaos in the postcolonial Congo. Prince Louis RWAGASORE, the then Prime Minister elect of Burundi, was assassinated on 13th October 1961. Different sources have confirmed direct or indirect involvement of the Colonial Belgian state in the three critical killings.

The ideological aspect refers to the Hamitic hypothesis (Sanders, 1972). Its application particularly on Rwandan and Burundian societies constitute the root cause of the Hutu – Tutsi conflict that caused the 1994 Tutsi genocide in Rwanda. This identity based conflict has handicapped the emergence of inclusive identity and citizenship in both

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countries. Furthermore, the hypothesis remains the ideological matrix of conflicts not only in Rwanda and Burundi, but also in DRC and in Uganda.

The pre-colonial conception of borders refers to places where social environments met. Those social environments demarcated kingdoms frontiers. The colonial approach was different. It fixed new borders regardless of social environments, integrated different groups within the same colonial territories but, in certain cases, their integration in post colonial has been problematic.

If we take the case of Rwanda, a number of international colonial instruments (Shyaka, 2003) have determined its current borders with her neighbours:

- the Berlin Declaration of 1st August 1885;
- The German- British conventions of 1st July 1890;
- The German- British conventions of 14th May 1909
- The German- British conventions and of 14th May 1910;
- The ORTS- MILNER accord of 30th May 1909, as modified by the Treaty of London and approved by the League of Nations (LN) in 1936.

These colonial arrangements did not displace inhabitants. As a result, people of Rwandan descent were distributed in different colonial territories. These people's integration in the postcolonial states has been difficult and their exclusion has often led to violent conflicts. The "kanyarwanda war" (la guerre de kanyarwanda) in the Congo in the 1960's and the crisis in Uganda in the 1970's and 1980's and even the ongoing conflict in DRC especially in the Kivu demonstrate that. Currently, Rwanda is the only country in the region whose citizens of by gone times are confronted with nationality related and citizenship legitimacy problems in their countries of colonial adoption. As a result, they have become the core of insurrection whenever their nationality is put in question in respective countries. In this way, colonial borders have become a source of identity-based insecurity which can (and has) led to armed conflicts in the region.

2. Chronic Bad Leadership and Bad Governance

Regime evolution in postcolonial Africa portrays cases of mismanagement, official pillaging, dictatorships, irresponsibility, vacillation and confrontation (Chazan, 1999). Rwanda, Burundi, DRC (former Zaire) and Uganda are among the "top champions" of this disappointment on the continent. The colonial legacy as a source of conflict is still a problem, mainly because postcolonial states have been characterized by bad leadership and bad governance. Corruption, nepotism, exclusion, injustice and unequal distribution

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of national resources have become the primary indicators of the sort of governance found in these countries. This has not only exacerbated poverty and state weaknesses, but it has also destroyed social cohesion, hence fuelling violent conflicts. Instead of becoming a motor of sustainable development, the many and varied resources in the region have become a source of internal and trans-national conflicts.

The poor leadership and bad governance have led to different types of conflicts on the African continent. They include, among others, elite conflicts, factional conflicts, communal conflicts and mass conflicts (Chazan, 1999). Rwanda, Burundi, Uganda and RDC have been home at different times to a mixture of these types of conflicts.

The typology of regimes in Sub Saharan African indicates that in the four countries under study, four types of regime forms dominated: hegemonic, populist, personal-coercive and the regime breakdown (Chazan, 1999). All these four countries have experienced total or partial regime breakdown: DRC in 1990's, Uganda between 1981 and 1986; Burundi between 1993 and 1996 and Rwanda in 1994. For many years, tyrannical and patriarchal leadership styles dominated political centers in this region (Chazan, 1999).

The conflict-generating political systems that have characterized the region provide other valuable insights into this legacy of poor governance. Serious conflict is embedded in an inequitable social and economic system, reflecting prolonged exploitation supported by coercion (Jeong, 2000). Neglecting or even institutionalizing social injustices and economic inequalities, political order in the four countries proved inadequate to meeting the concerns of their people and diverse groups (Jeong, 2000). Consequently, social and economic erosion has been the main cause of conflicts.

3. Inadequate Political Systems: Democratic Patterns and Conflict-Fuelling Political (Partisan) Cleavages

After raising hopes of a major political renewal, Africa's "second wave" of democratization seems to be running out of steam (Mukum Mbaku, 2006). The critical issue for Africa today is not whether African states have the preconditions for democracy and democratization, simply because in many cases the inexistence of these preconditions, rather than discouraging the struggle for democracy, has served as a reason for the struggle (M. Mbaku, 2006).

The biggest problem is the contradiction between the deepest aspirations of the African societies for democratic governance and the apparent determination of their leadership to oppose the emergence of a conducive environment for democratization. Two elements seem to have been decisive in undermining the democratization processes in

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the four countries and Sub Saharan Africa in general: the poor design of democracy (and of political parties) and the militarization of politics.

In democratic countries, systems of political parties are characterized by seven partisan cleavages (A. Lijphart, 1981): socio-economic, religious, rural- urban, ethnic cultural, support to the government, foreign policy and post materialism. When referring to the Great Lakes Region, two anomalies are identifiable. First, socio-economic cleavage, which is the major ideological dimension of political parties found in all democracies and remains the real catalyst of development, is completely absent in the partisan system of different countries in this region. Political parties of different ideological denominations (social, socialist, labour, liberal orientation, etc.) have been created in respective countries but only in denominations.

Second, the primacy of identity (ethnic, religion and/or region based) has not only excessively dominated ideologies of political parties but also systematically excluded other ideological dimensions from the partisan system. The Hutu- Tutsi divide has been dominant in political parties in Byrundi and Rwanda. The north –south cleavage and confessional rivalries have dominated the political system in Uganda. And the DRC was a mixture of different types of identity based exclusion and conflicts. These two anomalies constitute powerful conflict intensifiers, as they have “empoisoned” political parties and “killed” democracy, citizenship and peace.

It is within this background that failure of different attempts, in some situations, to address various conflicts in the past can be understood. It allows us also to understand why in other situations, nothing positive was attempted to address communal conflicts. And with time, political order proved inadequate to respond to societal challenges, and consequently conflicts intensified.

4. Failure in Managing Critical Transitions

Conflicts in this region are not a product of the power of the states but are a result of their weakness. They have always erupted in the context of **critical failures in managing critical transitions**. It is within this background that the unfolding conflicts in this region are best understood. Indeed, by understanding this, one can begin to glean the various factors that have resulted in the ineffectiveness of the many mechanisms put in place to address those conflicts and/or that have provoked their re-activation.

The first transition was from the colonial to the independent state in the early 1960s. Rwanda, Burundi, the Congo and Uganda all failed this transition and this failure led to protracted internal conflicts in these countries. The second transition is from authoritarian/undemocratic regimes to democratic change in early 1990s. The 1994

genocide in Rwanda was the product of the failure in managing this critical transition. In Burundi, this failure provoked the partial collapse of the state between 1993 and 1996. Zaire (current DRC) had two parallel prime ministers between 1991 and 1996; most of the government functions were paralyzed and political crisis intensified. Uganda on her part, kept the one-party system and this increased political confrontation and communal conflicts intensified. The maintenance of at least negative peace after the 1994 genocide in Rwanda could be considered as the third transition. The failure to manage regionally and internationally this transition was the core cause of regional conflict that followed and is, at least partially, responsible for current instability in the Eastern DRC.

5. High degree of Internationalization of conflict in the Great Lakes

Compared to other continents, Africa shows the highest degree of internationalization of conflicts. For the total conflicts which affected the World between 1945 and 1990, this degree is about 70% for Africa while the average for the World was about 40% (Shyaka, 2003). In the post Cold War period, this trend has rather increased. The internationalization of the conflict in the region is due to many factors. These include economic profits by foreign actors, cultural rivalries and/or identity based proximities and geopolitical competition by foreign powers and states. This internationalization is facilitated by the large window of opportunity for external forces to penetrate different countries and the region as a whole.

No other foreign power has been as involved in African politics and conflicts as France. The military relations between France and Sub Saharan Africa have been special in terms of their nature, their intensity and their consequences. France has signed agreements of military cooperation with more than half of the African states and keeps military bases until today in Senegal, Gabon, Djibouti, Central African Republic, Ivory Coast and Chad (Doumelin, 1999). France sent thousands of her soldiers to many regular armies in Africa as technical military assistants and her military interventions/operations are unique. In the three decades that followed independences, France alone has launched more than 70 military operations in Sub Saharan African states. Twelve of these operations were launched in the Great Lakes Region (DRC, Burundi and Rwanda) and six in Rwanda alone between 1990 and 1994 (Doumelin, 1999; Shyaka, 2003).

It is critically important to note also that the internationalization of conflict undermines the effectiveness of international mechanisms of peace building in the region. This was one of the many reasons that led to the international Community's failure in Rwanda. "The Responsibility to Protect," as defined by a UN mandated commission, comprises the responsibility to prevent, the responsibility to react and the responsibility to rebuild.

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The international community and world powers failed in their responsibility to prevent and to react to the commission of genocide in Rwanda. They also failed to rebuild post genocide Rwanda, especially in dealing with refugees and genocide forces. In this context, they also failed their responsibility to prevent the regional conflict in the former Zaire. In 1998, the region exploded in a major armed conflict on Democratic Republic of the Congo's soil. This conflict involved many African regular armies, tens of rebel groups and European mercenaries. By omission and/or by commission, the International Community has failed to adequately react to this conflict, which was rightly called by Madeleine Albright the "First African World War". This major war has since ended, but its legacy continues.

Conclusion

The conflicts in Rwanda, Burundi, DR Congo and Uganda seem to have evolved into a major conflict system. Two complexities appear here and undermine the effectiveness of various conflict resolution and peace building instruments. The first complexity resides in the fact that the regional conflict system does not suppress (or change) conflict trends at national levels. Instead, each local/ national conflict goes on in its own dynamics, mutually catalyzing each other and being virtually capable to reinforce the regional conflict system. The second concern arises from the involvement of some foreign powers that suggest that external interventions are misled or have a misunderstanding of issues on the ground and that unless this is changed, such interventions cannot bring about peace in the region.

Ultimately, what is needed is a new paradigm (or new paradigms) for sustainable peace and security in the region. First, local peace imperatives must prevail over geopolitical interests of foreign powers. Secondly, peaceful political change in the Great Lakes countries should be given higher priority in the national and regional security architecture.

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