

'African solutions to African problems' – national, continental or international project?

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Recent events in Libya and Cote d'Ivoire have once again highlighted the issue of conflict in Africa, raising the question of whether the continent is capable of addressing crises without international intervention. The Rwandan genocide horrified the international community, and continues to influence their response to crises on the continent. Yet the history of Rwanda since 1994 offers lessons for today's African leaders about conflict resolution and reconciliation, as well as warnings to the international community about the challenges of supporting 'African solutions'.

Since the 1994 genocide Rwanda has become a key player in African security and an island of stability in a troubled region. At home, it has drawn on traditional conflict resolution and justice mechanisms, and home-grown 'solidarity camps', to rebuild community relationships. Rwanda has very much 'owned' its recovery, but paradoxically this would not be possible without the investment of the international community. Rwanda is a 'donor darling'; its government prioritises stability, guarantees impressive internal security and boasts the highest proportion of female parliamentarians anywhere in the world. It has a strong and capable military and has become one of the largest providers of troops to UN Peacekeeping missions.

Its contribution to the African Union-United Nations Assistance Mission in Darfur has earned Rwanda much praise: how often do states recovering from large-scale conflict, in this case genocide, send peacekeepers to prevent such violence elsewhere? However, these successes are only part of Rwanda's post-genocide story. Its interventions in neighbouring Democratic Republic of Congo, and the government's lack of tolerance for criticism, have led to growing concern. A leaked 2010 UN report accused Rwandan troops of committing genocide in Congo, whilst Presidential elections that year were marred by attacks on opponents of the government, often accused of 'genocide ideology' and 'divisionism'. Rwanda certainly illustrates the importance of 'national solutions', but the sustainability of peace relies on more open debate and less meddling in Congo, both of which could potentially be furthered by greater international involvement and pressure.

More broadly on the continent, recent events in Cote d'Ivoire and Libya have demonstrated the limits of Africa's nascent conflict management capabilities. In Libya, the African Union's (AU) belated intervention, a high level delegation aimed at brokering a ceasefire, is rejected as both naive and toothless. AU leaders continue to support a future role in Libya's post-uprising order for the current leader Gaddafi, who has provided financial backing to many African regimes and been a key supporter of the AU. Despite attempts by the AU to create regional military forces to intervene where civilians are threatened, the North Africa Regional Capacity, hosted by Libya, remains stalled by a lack of cooperation in the region.

The possibilities of an African-led solution in Cote D'Ivoire were perhaps more promising; the most accomplished and experienced of the regional conflict management forces, Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), is based in West Africa. However it is heavily reliant on Nigeria and, as an Anglophone state often resented by its French-speaking neighbours, Nigeria has shied away from intervention in this Francophone state. Thus despite years of early warning of signs of conflict in Cote d'Ivoire, ECOWAS has failed to respond robustly in the face of violence against civilians. Despite assertions that Ivorian forces led the way in ending the country's political standoff, France and the UN have in fact led the operation to oust discredited President Gbagbo.

The range of cases here, unfolding as we speak, demonstrate the challenges facing Africa, both at national and continental level, and the need for state building and peace building at a national level, but also greater cooperation between states. To build regional forces also means improving national armies; as the example of Rwanda above shows, such a relationship cannot be undertaken lightly. African states and organisations are gaining capacity and experience, with some notable, if partial, successes in Burundi, Somalia and Sudan. But in working towards African solutions to future crises on the continent, the international community, through its bilateral relations with African states, military training and support, and institutional capacity building, still has a significant role to play.

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