

# PEACE AND SECURITY CHALLENGES IN SOUTHERN AFRICA: GOVERNANCE DEFICITS AND LACKLUSTRE REGIONAL CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

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Peace and Security Challenges in Southern Africa: Governance  
Deficits and Lacklustre Regional Conflict Management

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Front cover: Maluku Transit Camp, 23 May 2014. In April-May  
2014 more than 130,000 nationals of the Democratic Republic  
of the Congo (DRC) were expelled from the Republic of Congo  
(Brazzaville). The expulsions caused an acute humanitarian crisis  
and there were allegations of human rights abuses, according  
to UN officials. Several thousands of expelled gathered at the  
Maluku transit camp, on the outskirts of the city of Kinshasa. Photo  
credit: Sylvain Liechti, UN Photo. Back cover: North Kivu, Democra-  
tic Republic of the Congo, 21 February 2009. Head of MONUC  
returns from IDP camp visit. Photo credit: Marie Frechon, UN Photo.

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# PEACE AND SECURITY CHALLENGES IN SOUTHERN AFRICA

GOVERNANCE DEFICITS AND LACKLUSTRE REGIONAL CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

Armed insurgencies, social cleavages and governance deficits relating to authoritarian rule and abuse of state resources all imperil peace and stability in Southern Africa. The Southern African Development Community’s institutional framework for regional peace and security is proving ineffective because its leaders are unwilling to enforce democratic principles.

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Over the past two decades, most of the countries in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) have been relatively peaceful and stable. But the region still faces challenges of armed insurgency, crisis of governance and lack of socio-economic development, and SADC is ill prepared to manage such issues effectively. While the SADC region continues to experience isolated armed conflicts, and while lack of development poses a major long-term risk to regional stability, governance deficits are currently the most acute source of instability. Over the past

decade, this has led to crises in various SADC states. Although SADC has gradually established a peace and security infrastructure in line with the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA), its institutions lack both material and political support, with member states reluctant to cede authority to supranational structures and to enforce SADC principles. The liberal-democratic principles enshrined in the organisation’s peace and security policies tend, in practice, to play second fiddle to the imperatives of anti-imperialism, stability and regime solidarity, and SADC has been unable to respond effectively to intrastate crises. Persistent governance deficits





and the organisation's lacklustre record of conflict management may in the long run arrest the development of the Southern African region.

### **Isolated armed insurgencies**

While Southern Africa has gradually emerged from the large-scale wars that, in some instances, dated back to the Cold War and the apartheid era, the region continues to be plagued by isolated armed conflicts that have their roots in the region's violent colonial and post-colonial past. In contrast to the intertwined anti-colonial wars against white minority regimes in the Cold War era and the Congo wars that involved external belligerents, contemporary conflicts in Southern Africa are overwhelmingly national rather than international.

Aside from the ongoing war against armed groups in eastern DRC, in recent years smaller armed conflicts have flared up again in both Mozambique and Angola. Mozambican Renamo rebels took up arms in 2012 and, although they lacked the military capacity to rekindle a civil war, they did attack government troops and transport routes, creating economic disruption and insecurity. Driven by the rebel leader's political ambitions and the social grievances of marginalised fighters, the insurgency compelled the country's government to concede territorial autonomy, political privileges and economic benefits. A truce has halted the violence and the recent death of the long-standing Renamo leader, Afonso Dhlakama, may provide an opportunity for a meaningful peace process. But the peace will remain fragile until such time as the grievances over centralised, authoritarian governance and economic marginalisation are addressed and Renamo fighters are demobilised. Meanwhile in Angola, as part of a long-standing separatist struggle, in 2016 armed insurgents launched a series of attacks on government troops in the country's oil-rich Cabinda province and disrupted extractive activities. The enduring low-level insurgency arguably does not have the potential to destabilise the central state, but it has led the Angolan government to maintain tight security in Cabinda and indeed the country.

### **Crises of governance**

The most acute crises in the SADC states in the past 10 years have been sparked by issues of governance, including electoral stalemate, authoritarian rule, government unaccountability and the abuse of state resources in a bid to hold onto power. Constitutional crises resulting from the undermining of democratic institutions by authoritarian regimes and the military have been tempora-

rily contained by the formation of transitional governments in Zimbabwe, Madagascar and the DRC. But the enduring crisis of governance in Zimbabwe recently escalated into a thinly veiled military coup, Madagascar may face renewed tensions in the upcoming elections and the DRC has yet to fully restore the regular constitutional order. Meanwhile Swaziland remains an absolute monarchy with severe governance deficits, and Lesotho continues to suffer from political instability and military interference in civilian politics. Governance deficits, political conflict and electoral violence even affect the consolidated democracy of South Africa, as well as otherwise peaceful states like Zambia.

Though it is not exclusively states controlled by former liberation movements that are affected by such crises and deficits of governance, a growing body of literature does suggest that some of the current challenges can be traced back to the liberation movement and guerrilla army legacy of current governments. The mindset of today's political elites largely evolved in the context of war, and this may well account for the authoritarianism, lack of democratic values, commando style of governance and militaristic culture of several Southern African governments, as well as for the involvement of the security sector in civilian affairs and party politics. In some instances, the parties of liberation simply took over the oppressive instruments of the old colonial regimes and have continued to use these to crush opponents, consolidate their power and accumulate wealth. Moreover, political and military elites that dedicated their lives to the armed struggle against racist regimes, and political organisations that saw themselves as Leninist vanguard parties, have developed a sense of entitlement to power and privilege.

This tendency has been most pronounced in Zimbabwe, where the regime of the Zimbabwe African National Union – Patriotic Front (Zanu-PF) has always equated a potential loss of power with the recolonisation of the country, and where the military leadership has justified its coup as an operation to restore the legacy of the liberation struggle. But the trend can equally well be observed in Mozambique, where the Frelimo government's liberation narrative makes it difficult for party stalwarts to accept political opposition and freedom of expression. The prevailing political culture in Angola, shaped by decades of war, leaves little scope for the kind of political competition that is needed in a democratic society; the resulting coercive 'command state' has enabled a kleptocratic elite to virtually monopolise the country's national resources.

And yet, while run by liberation-party governments, South Africa and Namibia are among the most democratic states in the region. Although they do display some of the same negative tendencies, they have generally adhered to the principles of liberal electoral democracy. While most SADC states have moved from authoritarian to democratic types of regime, as Khabele Matlosa observes, the level of democratisation in the region varies widely – from closed, authoritarian systems to open, liberal democracies. It is certainly true that democracy is neither a guarantee of nor a prerequisite for peace and stability; however, over the past two decades the democratic deficit, poor governance and lack of accountability in even some of the most democratic SADC states have resulted in a whole slew of intrastate crises, covering elections, change of government, mismanagement of public affairs and disregard for citizens' aspirations. Governance deficits may therefore be said to constitute the most immediate threat to peace and security in Southern Africa.

### Socio-economic development deficits

Southern Africa has some of the world's most unequal societies, with enormous social cleavages that were

forged by settler colonialism and racial segregation, but that have persisted in the post-colonial period. Given this, it is unsurprising that socio-economic grievances should not only impinge on human security, but also represent a formidable challenge to peace and stability in the region over the longer term. Investments in human capital and the creation of economic opportunities have been impeded by sluggish growth rates, and over the past decade unemployment has risen steadily across much of the region. In virtually every SADC country, vast swathes of the population continue to subsist below the national poverty line. Meanwhile several consecutive years of drought and extreme weather conditions – phenomena that are likely to become more frequent, owing to climate change – have exposed vulnerable communities to acute food shortages.

Some 34.2 percent of the population of Southern Africa is below the age of 25, and that proportion is growing rapidly. In the absence of improved economic and educational opportunities, the region is likely to experience more social unrest in the foreseeable future. In South Africa sustained social protests that have been fuelled by extreme inequality have often turned violent and xenophobic in the last ten years. Meanwhile, in



Photo credit: DIRCO, South Africa

SADC Headquarters in Gaborone, Botswana, 16 November 2017. Maite Nkoana-Mashabane, South Africa's minister of international relations and cooperation, and Stergomena Lawrence Tax, executive secretary of SADC, discuss the political situation in Zimbabwe after the coup d'état against Mugabe, at a meeting of the SADC troika plus council chair.



# In practice, the principles that supposedly guide SADC's crisis responses are 'renegotiated' at the Summit level

Angola, rampant inequality and the flagrant accumulation of wealth by the ruling elite have triggered youth protests against the government, which has responded with violence and repression. Similarly, in Zimbabwe economic despair and frustration with a complacent and corrupt government has sparked a wave of social media-driven protest in 2016. In Mozambique, economic grievances and a feeling of marginalisation have led to social unrest in the capital and have allowed political entrepreneurs to mobilise fighters for the Renamo rebellion. The politically well-connected Mozambican elite has also been awarded licences enabling them to exploit the country's mineral wealth and leaving the population at large feeling short-changed. All this has the potential to lead to further conflict.

## SADC's sluggish development

In addition to the Organ on Politics, Defence and Security Cooperation (the Organ) that was incorporated into its framework in 1996, SADC has created a set of institutions that – together with structures of the African Union (AU) and other regional economic communities – form part of the APSA. The development of SADC's peace and security institutions is faltering, however, and the structures that have been created thus far lack political support, organisational capacity and resources.

Ever since its formation in 1992, SADC that became embroiled in the Congo War has responded to a series of intrastate crises. In the past decade the outcomes of its crisis interventions and its track record in promoting peace and the democratic principles that are enshrined in its founding documents have been mixed.

The institutional legacies of SADC's predecessor organisations have led to a bifurcated structure, vesting both the SADC Summit and Organ with authority to manage peace and security concerns. SADC's small Secretariat and the Organ Directorate remain poorly resourced. Institutions enshrined in the SADC Treaty

that could protect citizens' rights against arbitrary rule have not been empowered owing to member states' unwillingness to cede authority to these supranational structures. The Parliamentary Forum has no legislative power and the SADC Tribunal was dismantled by the overwhelmingly powerful summit after reaching an inconvenient ruling.

The lifespan of SADC's most important policy document on peace and security, the revised Strategic Indicative Plan of the Organ (Sipo II), has been extended to 2020, even though parts of it are outdated and it fails to set out concrete, detailed plans to achieve the document's objectives. According to Anthoni van Nieuwkerk, some progress has been made on election management, the establishment of a mediation infrastructure, SADC's peace-keeping and early-warning capacities, and the regional coordination of policing and fighting crime. However, Sipo II's implementation and functioning of the infrastructure have been impeded by lack of coordination between SADC institutions and, most importantly, by member states' unwillingness to lend adequate material and political support to the supranational structures. Having been created on the initiative of the Secretariat and donors, these structures lack ownership on part of the member states. Thus, while SADC has all the sub-regional components of the continental APSA in place (including a standby force, whose deployment readiness has been demonstrated in the DRC and Lesotho), most of the institutions – and especially those in the critical domain of mediation and preventive diplomacy – function poorly and are short-staffed.

SADC's policies on regional peace and security reflect a normative tension between the principle of national sovereignty and the mandate to promote peace, human rights and democracy in member states. In practice, the principles that guide SADC's crisis responses are constantly renegotiated by the members of the Summit, whose composition is very heterogeneous.



The dominance of liberation-party governments, the lack of democratic commitment from some members, and SADC's limited capacity to enforce its principles in non-compliant regimes mean that stability and sovereignty tend to take precedence over democracy. According to Laurie Nathan, the region's anti-imperialist defence reaction, which has been exploited by Zimbabwe and other regimes, has prevented the organisation from offering effective protection for human security.

### **A chequered conflict management record**

SADC reacted decisively to military meddling in civilian politics and government instability in the tiny state of Lesotho, by sanctioning the deployment of troops. And several SADC states contributed troop contingents to the UN-mandated Force Intervention Brigade in the DRC (where they suffered human losses). But SADC was unable to respond effectively either to the political crisis created by DRC President Kabila's failure to hold elections before his constitutional term of office expired or to the intrastate crises in Angola, Mozambique and Zimbabwe mentioned above. Given that Renamo used to be sponsored by apartheid South Africa and elicits little sympathy from Southern Africa's liberation-party governments, SADC was understandably in no position to act as a credible and impartial mediator in the Mozambican conflict. However, SADC also failed

to decisively respond to the rebellion in Cabinda and state-sponsored violence against religious and youth groups in Angola.

SADC tried for 13 years to contain the Zimbabwean crisis through various diplomatic initiatives and stabilised the country by brokering a unity government. But after the severely flawed, yet credible enough, 2013 elections allowed the Summit to drop the perennial Zimbabwean problem of its agenda, SADC watched as Zimbabwe again spiralled into economic and political crisis. Though the SADC Chair stressed that neither the AU nor SADC would tolerate an unconstitutional change of government, the thin veneer of constitutionality that veiled Zimbabwe's coup d'état was enough to ensure that SADC and the international community acquiesced to the military coup that compelled President Mugabe to resign and that consolidated the hold on power of those Zanu-PF military hardliners responsible for most of the human-rights abuses of the post-colonial era. By accepting the de facto coup, SADC not only displayed its impotence vis-à-vis the Zimbabwean 'securocrats' and its unwillingness to pay the high cost of enforcing democratic principles, but also set a dangerous precedent, signalling that the Community would tolerate unconstitutional changes of government and military meddling, just so long as they were thinly dressed up in constitutional clothing.



United Nations, New York, 19 March 2018. Mark Lowcock, under-secretary-general for humanitarian affairs and emergency relief coordinator, briefs the Security Council on the situation in DRC.

Photo credit: Manuel Elias, UN Photo





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## About the Author



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