

Africa Policy Outlook 1999

By Africa Action

The resurgence of conflict in several regions of the continent in 1998 underlined the fragility of efforts to advance Africa on both the political and economic fronts. Despite improved food crop production and continued economic growth in many countries, economic expansion was set back by fallout from the Asian economic crisis and by low prices for oil exports, among other factors. The most dramatic shift in the prospects for democratization came from the death of Nigerian military ruler Sani Abacha in mid-1998, opening up new political space in Africa's most populous country. At the beginning of 1999, nevertheless, Nigeria's transition to civilian rule still faces a perilous course.

President Clinton's trip to Africa in spring 1998 represented the high point of official U.S. attention to the continent. After the trip, however, despite the efforts of some policy-makers, Africa quickly resumed its place near the bottom of the foreign policy agenda. Washington's military response to the terrorist attack in August on U.S. embassies in Dar es Salaam and Nairobi quickly sidelined the "partnership" theme in favor of unilateral action.

Meanwhile, the Africa Growth and Opportunity Act, pushed by the Administration and many in Congress as a "paradigm shift" from aid to trade and investment, did not make it through Congress. But critics failed to move the debate to constructive discussion on how trade and investment might be combined with other measures to promote mutually profitable U.S.-African relations.

The "new start" in Africa policy is still more rhetoric than reality. The dominant de facto guidelines of U.S. policy remain unchanged: promotion of free-

market fundamentalism as a panacea for economic woes, together with endorsement of democracy, human rights and conflict resolution. The latter is implemented in practice primarily by ad-hoc response to crises without sustained high-level attention.

Washington is not alone, however, in failing to craft a comprehensive response to Africa's complex crises. Escalated conflict threatens not only to undermine the image of the "African Renaissance," but also to siphon off resources and energies from efforts toward political and economic progress. This affects even the majority of countries that are not at war. A central imperative for 1999 is to regain momentum in resolving-or at least checking-conflict in several key areas.

Conflict Zones

Last year saw the eruption of border war between former allies Ethiopia and Eritrea, intensified conflict in Sierra Leone, war in Guinea-Bissau, continued war in Sudan and the Great Lakes region, conflict and intervention in Lesotho, the breakdown of the Lusaka peace process in Angola, and a return to full-scale war in Congo (Kinshasa) involving not only Congolese but also most of Congo's neighbors. At the end of the year fragile cease-fires were in effect on the Ethiopian/Eritrean border, in Guinea-Bissau, and in Lesotho. Elsewhere, diplomatic initiatives seemed to have little momentum and to have low priority on the international agenda.



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All these conflicts have resulted in abuses against civilians and humanitarian emergencies. Efforts to address these are likely to have only a limited impact in the near future, even if there are significant improvements in the international capacity to respond. Reversing the pattern will require, at minimum, more significant coordinated peace-making, combined with meaningful sanctions against the most abusive and recalcitrant parties.

The conflict with the widest repercussions outside its own borders pits the regime of Laurent Kabila in Kinshasa against a rebel force composed in large part of allies who in 1997 joined with Kabila to overthrow the Mobutu regime. Rwandan and Ugandan troops are engaged on the side of Congolese rebel forces, while troops from Angola, Zimbabwe, Namibia, and Chad are defending Kabila. At the beginning of 1999, the major stumbling blocks to productive peace talks are Kabila's refusal to include the rebels in negotiations and all the armed parties' indifference to the voices of civilian Congolese.

The prospects of breakthroughs in peace in 1999 are highly uncertain in this and other ongoing conflicts. In Angola, the United Nations appears ready to abandon its peacekeeping mission, while Jonas Savimbi's military wing of UNITA continues to sell diamonds to finance arms purchases as it returns to war. Disgust with leaders who find ideological or ethnic excuses for continuing or reigniting conflicts continues to grow among the public in almost all African countries. The difficult, yet imperative task is to translate such sentiment into effective national or international peace-making mechanisms.

Development Priorities

Africa's aggregate growth rates for 1998 were estimated at 3.7 percent at year end, almost one percent less than predicted, but still the highest for any world region. More than half of African countries maintained economic growth rates of 3 percent or more, enough to enable marginal increases in per capita income. Nevertheless, the full effect of the Asian crisis on African exports is yet to be felt, and low oil prices have cut dramatically into the earnings of oil-exporting countries.

In 1999 Africa will remain highly vulnerable to shifts in commodity prices and to global economic developments in general. Of Africa's two largest economies, Nigeria is affected by low oil prices as well as political uncertainties, while South Africa faces currency fluctuations, capital outflows, and the potentially devastating impact of the HIV/AIDS epidemic.

Private investment in Africa is likely to continue to grow, averaging high rates of return, while still accounting for less than 10 percent of investment flows to developing countries as a group. Such investment will continue to be highly concentrated in a few countries and in selected export commodities, such as oil. Meanwhile, international aid continues to decline and African government budgets are stretched by "structural adjustment" programs. By 1997, the proportion of GNP devoted to development assistance by developed countries had fallen to 0.22 per cent, the lowest ever. Among them, the U.S. was the lowest, at 0.08 percent. The gap between rhetorical commitment to development and the



public investment needed to implement it is likely to continue to grow.

Areas likely to receive greater attention in 1999 include: (1) the threat to economic growth as well as human welfare posed by the HIV/AIDS epidemic and inadequate health services generally; and (2) the massive debt burden carried by most African countries, and the inadequacy of international debt relief initiatives to date.

Responding to Africa's need for increased public investment and balanced economic policies would require more active questioning of the "Washington consensus" on unfettered market liberalization. Such critiques will likely find more sympathetic ears in 1999, including within Washington-based institutions such as the World Bank. But the International Monetary Fund and the U.S. government remain particularly resistant to rethinking.

Governance Issues

In 1999 as in 1998, prospects for advances in democratization of African countries present a very mixed picture. Across the continent, entrenched hierarchical and repressive structures are vying against a wide array of new initiatives. Africa's media and nongovernmental organizations are beginning to benefit significantly from Internet access to spread their messages across national and international boundaries, and this trend will likely accelerate during the year. However, the dominant tendency among African rulers is still to regard independent critics as a threat.

As the year begins, the most prominent test case for democratization is Nigeria. The country is midway through a series of elections promised to deliver civilian rule by May, as military ruler

Abdusalam Abubakr gradually eases his predecessor's repressive policies. The transition process, however, is still fragile.

Even a successful move to civilian rule in Nigeria would leave basic issues of democratization unaddressed. These include regional and ethnic inequalities and the division of powers between the federal government and other units. The distribution of oil wealth, concentrated in the country's Delta region, is a particularly explosive issue. As protest in the Delta escalates, both the Nigerian military government and the international oil companies which exploit the region's wealth (Shell, Mobil, Chevron and others) continue to opt for repression over dialogue.

The outcome in Nigeria will have a major impact not only in West Africa, but across the continent. In Southern Africa, forthcoming elections in South Africa and Mozambique offer opportunities for consolidating democratic institutions. Central Africa and much of East Africa are preoccupied by conflict. For Africa as a whole, the momentum towards greater democratization is threatened not only by conflict, but by growing perceptions that elites can manipulate electoral processes to evade popular accountability and that economic policy decisions are still largely dictated by outside forces. Despite the obstacles, the trend towards more open discussion of these issues, not only by nongovernmental organizations but also within African governments and inter-governmental agencies, is likely to continue in 1999.

