

Africa in 2021: Backsliding democracy and heightening humanitarian crises

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Introduction

Africa has witnessed several changes in 2021, especially in its polity, economy and human security/non-traditional security areas. Covid related health securitization, economic slowdown, and global supply chain disruptions, along with existing ethnic and communal divides, inter and intra-state-conflicts affected African politics and economy significantly. Till a couple of decades ago, military coups and authoritarian governments ruled the roost in Africa. However, in the last two decades, there has been substantial progress in Africa regarding a shift towards democracy, however formal and limited it was, apart from healthy economic growth. In the realm of polity, the long-serving African leaders, most of whom were military heads, stepped down or were replaced during this period, providing hope to people that democracy is on the ascent in the continent. However, there is a perception that such trends are declining, especially in the last few years and specifically in the current year. In general, the traditional fault lines in African society began to widen in recent times as the economy and society were pushed to the margin because of Covid management, health-related securitization, economic crisis and so on in the year 2021. At the same time, a few positive developments, such as the involvement of international and regional organizations, as well as State and non-state entities, in conflict resolution shows that there are attempts to bring in course correction, along with some degree of economic recovery, however uneven it is. In this context, this brief looks at the general context of politics and economy and the non-traditional security challenges that Africa faced and is facing in 2021.

I

Major Development in Africa in 2021

African politics in 2021

In 2021, four African States returned to non-democratic regimes such as Chad, Guinea, Mali and Sudan (of course, in Sudan, there was a fragile/compromised reinstatement of Abdella Hamdok, the ousted Prime Minister). Out of several States which showed some progress towards democratization after autocratic/authoritarian rule for decades, States like Mali and Zimbabwe witnessed a steep decline in democratization in recent

times. However, formal and substantive democracy continues to thrive in Ghana, Namibia, Mauritius and Botswana. Of course, South Africa, a stable democracy, which was on the path to becoming a 'consolidated democracy', has faced several crises in 2021. In Ethiopia, in the Horn of Africa, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed is locked in a civil war with Tygrayans, represented by Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF). Apart from ethnic civil war, Ethiopia is also involved in a major conflict with Egypt and Sudan regarding the construction of the Greater Ethiopia Renaissance Dam (GERD) in recent times. This, in a way, shows new emerging fault lines on sharing of precious resources like water. Even in Tunisia, which has seen a peaceful transition to democracy following Arab Spring has parliamentary democracy suspended right now though there is a promise of early elections next year. The democratic transition went into total disarray in States like Egypt and Zimbabwe after projecting a robust picture. In certain cases, an ambiguous picture is emerging, such as in Libya. Saif al-Islam al-Qaddafi, the rebel leader and the son of Gaddafi has been allowed to contest elections in Libya (originally scheduled for 24 December 2021 has been postponed).

Africa has also witnessed 'Constitutional Coups' such as in Cote d'Ivoire. Jacob Zuma, the former South African President, was forced to serve a prison term due to the intervention of the Supreme Court of the country. Court also intervened in Zambia when the ruling party tried to subvert the election results. These developments imply that wherever institutions are strong, course correction happens efficiently whereas opposite manifests in contexts where institutions are weak. For instance, where social media is systematically stifled, the leaders of opposition are routinely jailed in States like Nigeria. In some cases, like Egypt, Ethiopia and in Eritrea, journalists are being jailed. Ethiopia has witnessed the worst instances of curbs on media freedom. There have been several rounds of media ban in Tanzania too. The Chinese model of system is also widely followed in certain countries.

It is often stated that the role of institutions and control of corruption do contribute to the strengthening of societal fabric. However, corruption scenario has also been significantly affected in the recent times. In fact, in the realm of corruption, the Covid has aggravated the vulnerabilities and stifled the responses to corruption across the continent. A recent study shows that 28 per cent of African people believe that there is corruption institutionalized across the continent. The data from Transparency International (on Corruption Perception Index) shows that the scores of 32 Sub-Saharan African countries are at the lowest-performing regions in the world. A few States like Seychelles, Mauritania, and Cabo Verde show improved scores, whereas Sudan, Sudan and Somalia have the lowest scores in the entire world.

In the realm of Violent Non-state Actors in Africa in 2021, Al Shabad, a violent terrorist group in Somalia is active in neighbouring countries like Kenya and Somalia. ISS-L and Boko Haram in Nigeria are exploiting the social and communal fault lines in the society to create more violence. Even inactive groups like Polisario Front- a group in West Africa got reactivated in the current year in Africa where they oppose Morocco's interference in Western Sahara. Similarly, Uganda and Congo (DRC) are jointly fighting the ISS-IL related Allied Democratic Forces (ADF). Traditionally ADF, a rebel group, is opposed to Musuveni in Uganda.

Economy of Africa in 2021

Africa, a region that was relying on foreign trade had huge issues following global supply chain disruptions like lack of adequate infrastructure, along with corruption and security issues, regulatory issues. African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) which came into existence in 2019 began to trade under the new framework from 1 January 2021. The arrangement is supposed to increase African trade by 33 per cent and reduce the trade deficit by 51 per cent annually. However, emerging partners like China have decided (in December 2021) to cut down financial commitments to Africa to \$ 40 Bn for next three years (from \$ 60 Bn previously), which includes investments, credit lines, trade and special drawing rights. This development has emerged as a consequence to the significant losses suffered by Africa due to the disruptions of global supply chains.

At the same time, the economies of certain countries have grown substantially, like Congo, for instance, which is expected to grow at the rate of 5.4 per cent in 2021 and at the rate of 6.4 per cent in 2022. Congo, which is also the main source of cobalt in the world is deeply collaborating with emerging States like China which in turn raise several allegations of corrupt practices and human rights violations. African civil society organizations and groups raise these issues and have highlighted their impact for social and the environmental areas of the continent (recently raised in COP 26). In addition, the collapse of the economy and the subsequent crisis in the energy sector has affected the economies of several countries like Nigeria as evident from depreciating revenue from oil.

Across the continent, there has been a decline in informal sector. For instance, there has been a decline of 14.5 per cent of informal sector employment in South Saharan Africa (SSA). Similarly, unemployment rate has gone up across the continent though some states have started recovering fast such as South Africa.

Non-traditional security challenges in 2021

Several African States are experiencing climate hotspots, especially in Western African regions and Lake Victoria Basin countries (Kenya, Burundi, Tanzania, Uganda, and Rwanda). These regions encounter a rise in temperature, erratic rainfall, soil erosion and flooding as part of larger climate change. It is to be noted that though 48 Sub-Saharan African countries contribute 0.55 cumulative emission of CO₂, seven of the ten countries vulnerable to climate change are from the continent of Africa. Similarly, climate change is impacting even macro-level economic performances; for instance, climate change-induced drought has brought down the economies of countries like Djibouti by 3.3 per cent. A broad assessment indicates that Africa requires USD 430 trillion by 2030, to mitigate and adapt to climate change.

In the health front, Africa's issues such as malaria, vaccine inequalities and lack of sanitation facilities have aggravated with the onset of Covid pandemic across the continent. In fact, malaria and Neglected Tropic Diseases (NTD) made a comeback due to the overall decline of the economy, global supply chain disruptions and so on. Even in the vaccine front, only 5 per cent of African people are fully vaccinated. In the current pace, Africa will be able to complete the vaccination of its entire population only by 2025.

In the realm of gender issues too, there has been several key changes this year, negative and positive. To name a few, in South Africa, there has been an increase in gender-based violence during the pandemic. The Government promised to address these issues through National Strategic Plan, but failed to implement it. In fact, the South African President has termed gender-based violence as a 'second pandemic'. Crimes such as rape, domestic violence and child murders have gone up substantially in this period. However, abortion laws are being passed in the African States in large numbers, wherein Benin, the West African State, has become the latest in this category (law was passed in October 2021). Similarly, food insecurity/hunger has increased drastically with around 700 million people in Africa likely to face hunger/poverty-related issues. East Africa is facing the threat of hunger at a larger scale, especially States like Ethiopia, South Sudan, Somalia, Burundi, Somalia and son.

In addition, an energy crisis is looming large, with around 600 million people living without access to electricity in Africa. An additional 30 million is being added this year due to the pandemic. Thus, sources of energy outside the realm of conventional energy are one of the major concerns of Africa in contemporary times. In this context, Africa is tying up with International Solar Energy (ISA) significantly. India has contributed to the African energy sector in 2021 by way of training, sharing of information, analytics, in addition to an investment of Rs. 150 Bn. This is significant, especially when one takes into consideration the fact that 74 per cent African population has no access to electricity. Around 34 states from Africa, a significant proportion has already joined the ISA. This is part of the Indian strategy to align with Africa at different levels – bilateral (with states like Congo, Mali, and Rwanda, to name a few), regional (with regional groups such as IOR-ARC, ECOWAS, SADC) and continental (with African Union). Furthermore, major powers like the US have also been engaging with Africa in the energy sector. 'Prosper Africa' is an initiative to further trade between the US and Africa in recent times, which includes energy sector.

II Major Trends in 2021

In general, authoritarianism and anti-democratic trends are deeply catching up with African States in 2021 with at least four states showing return to non-democratic regimes such as Chad, Guinea, Mali and Sudan. A glance at these developments leads one to decipher a few broader trends and trajectories. The 'African renaissance' - a euphemistic term used in the last decade to describe rapid democratization and economic growth in the continent, did face a major jolt in 2021. However, unlike the last decades, there has been substantial decline of democracy in Africa and increase in a number of civil wars/armed conflicts in recent times. Several factors contribute to this situation, ranging from the current pandemic to institutional failure to public policy collapses. In a way, there is a backsliding of democracy in Africa. The democratization trend has begun to decline in the recent period. Certain States, which were considered to have substantial democratic practices such as South Africa, has begun to show tremors in their polities. Another important issue that has become pronounced in

African democracy in the current year is the failure to accommodate inclusive politics. There is a perception that consensus democracy which is more inclusive and participatory is the road ahead for Africa.

Africa has several continental and sub-regional institutions and norms/legal structures to address these issues, but implementation is a challenge, especially with presence of diversity in terms of the capabilities of each State. The conflicts in Ethiopia in the current year raise a lot of anxiety among Africa observers, precisely because the country showed certain progressive trajectories in the recent past. One could also see a large number of protests from the part of civil society against authoritarian tendencies in States like Ghana, Kenya and Algeria. Freedom House report 2021 suggests that only 16 per-cent of people are living under democratic set-ups (fully democratic or partially democratic) in Africa; this is reflective of the grim reality though States like Mauritius, Cape Verde and so on, have established multi-party liberal democracies. Even in States like South Africa which inaugurated multi-party and multi-ethnic democracy three decades ago, the several backsliding tendencies could be witnessed in the year 2021.

Similarly, Violent Non-state actors (VNSAs) and the conflicts they are involved in are on the rise. At a macro level, diversity principles, which was part of a Pan-African ideology is fading in Africa today as evident from ethnic and communal conflicts in the continent, even in States which were multi-party and multi-ethnic democracies. The continued violence on the part of VNSAs like Boko Haram, Al Shabad, ADF, Polisario Front is a grim reminder of conflicts that run through the societies of several African States.

In the realm of economy, Africa registered a contraction of 3.4 per cent in the year 2020 and it is expected to grow by 3.4 per cent in the year 2021. There has been huge global supply chain disruptions due to the pandemic, which severely affected African States substantially, which included the breakages of supply chains, blockades of trade routes and lack of logistical things –cargo ships, supply of labour, along with hike in transportation costs and so on. In the realm of economy, it has been a year of mixed trends in Africa. At one level, Africa suffered hugely. The African States show the trends of economic recovery; however, the pace is slow and varied across the continent. Countries like Angola are expected to grow 0.4 per cent while Côte d’Ivoire and Kenya are expected to grow more than 5 per cent. The structural and macro-economic reforms are being aggressively pursued by certain countries in the face of macro-level economic crisis which in their perspective will bring in sustainable, resilient and low carbon economies. At the same time, reduction in Asian States’ involvement (like that of China’s lowering its economic commitment to Africa) in the continent can have wide ranging effects. For instance, Africa’s economic emergence, primarily through the trade of oil and other precious minerals, along with the continents’ urge to secure investment and technology has ensured a certain degree of ‘tactical opportunities’ and ‘tactical alternatives’. Reduction in ‘tactical opportunities’ and ‘tactical alternatives’ can reduce strategic autonomy of African States in the realm of economy considerably.

Vaccine inequalities are a significant issue in the health front of Africa in contemporary times, especially for a pandemic like Covid 19. If global players, both major State and pharma companies, do not support Africa in terms of providing vaccines, technologies

and resources, the health situation will worsen in the continent and affect not only the region but the entire world. The emergence of Omicron is a classic example of such a crisis. Climate change issues are likely to accentuate in Africa, especially in Western and Eastern Africa (Sahel and Lake Victoria River basin regions, particularly). In general, the strategy employed by several states in Africa is to adopt 'softer and collaborative diplomacy' especially in the realm of climate diplomacy. There are different kinds of gender-based inequalities and violence in Africa that have shown an upward momentum. Food security/hunger and gender inequalities are the areas of enhanced concerns in contemporary Africa. Africa's recovery (economic), stabilization in polities, addressal of human security concerns in the coming years will depend on the institutional strengths, inclusive policies/politics from the domestic arenas of each State, accompanied with international support which in reality will produce a varied outcome in the continent. Political developments in Ethiopia, evolution of AfCFTA, the interventions of African Union (AU) and regional frame works, and the role of major power like the US, the European Union (EU) and China will be keenly observed in 2022 along with implications that health insecurities like Covid, climate change play out in Africa. These developments are likely to affect livelihood of millions, especially the ones living on farming, fishing, and pastoral activities and so on. In a way, climate change issues can slow down Africa's economic recovery. Climate change can make African people migrate in large numbers in the future. A World Bank study projects that 86 million people are likely to migrate in Africa by 2050. Another issue that is likely to emerge significant in the next year or in near future is food insecurity. It is likely to accentuate mainly because of pandemic, multi-dimensional conflicts, economic depression and various kinds of natural calamities. The states which are likely to face food insecurity are Nigeria, Congo and Chad.

III Forecasts

To conclude, one can state that there has been a visible decline of polity and economy in Africa in the current year. African renaissance, once a celebrated idea, is facing several internal crises, partially because of the unforeseen onset of Covid pandemic. Pandemic induced securitization economic decline further changed the fault lines in African polity, economy and society. The backsliding of democracy, along with return of authoritarianism in certain States, which had begun to take democratic route, is the new reality in the continent. There were several attempts to course correct political crises (especially digression from democratic paths and right violations in certain countries and region). Such efforts were undertaken by global and regional bodies, along with national governments and prominent non-state actors. Economy, though showing some form of recovery, is still in crisis as evident from increasing rates of unemployment, loss of livelihoods and other macro-economic issues like inflation, depreciating FDI and trade. The newly formed African Free Trade framework offers some hope in the realm of economy in the near future. Even at the governance level, corruption continues to be a grave issue in most of the states though there are positive trends emerging from smaller African Sates like Seychelles, Cape Verde and Botswana. On human security challenges emanating out of health, environment, gender inequality, food security, will have huge impacts in Africa in the coming years, especially in the backdrop of rampant

Covid related issues. Concerted efforts from global arena, along with involvements (both State and non-State actors) can significantly help African governments in tiding over current crises.

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