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# **African Great Lakes Region: Governance and Politics**

**Abstract:** This article aims to indicate the sources of problems in the field of governance and politics in the African Great Lakes Region. The countries of this region play an essential role in the global socio-political and economic system. Their development is hampered by numerous external and internal conflicts resulting from both the historical and contemporary problems of the countries. Colonialism had a major impact on the development of African countries. It manifested itself, among other things, in the spread of political domination. Adopting state management patterns from European culture and attempt to transplant them on African ground without understanding local cultural conditions contributed too much post-colonial fresh and modern conflict. Examples of this are failures to establish liberal democracy and its crises in the African Great Lakes Region.

**Keywords:** *African Great Lakes Region, governance, politics, democracy, elections, African crisis, African Politics*

## **Good Governance**

Africa's Great Lakes are located in and around the East African Rift Valley, including Lake Victoria, Lake Tanganyika, and Lake Malawi. All these three water bodies have a total volume of 31,000 cubic kilometers. It is a quarter of the world's unfrozen freshwater. Also included on many lists of these Great Lakes are Lake Kyoga (Uganda), Lake Albert (Uganda), Lake Edward (Uganda), Lake Kivu (Rwanda), Lake Turkana (Kenya). These lakes have long been characterized by a vast biodiversity and harbor a tenth of the globe's fish species. According to the geographical division, Africa's Great Lakes Region comprises all the countries in the neighborhood of the mentioned lakes. These are Burundi, The Democratic Republic of the

Congo, Kenya, Malawi, Rwanda, Tanzania, and Uganda (Princeton University Library, 2013). Swahili is the most widely spoken language in this part of Africa (Rutagengwa, 2013), where it is also considered an official language for the DRC, Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania, and Uganda. Considered as a zone of immense potential in the post-independence period, the area has, over the past decades, been a scene of armed conflicts and civil unrest.

Up to now, there are many arguments that a sovereign nation does not easily admit any weaknesses or failures in its political system. Therefore, the concept of good governance originates from the policy intrusion of International Non-Governmental Organizations (Rhodes, 1996, p. 660). It has been of great necessity to raise the impact of foreign aid, which entails keen scrutiny into the quality of governance. In this regard, foreign aid donors allocate funds basing, not just on poverty and related issues. They also consider the level of good governance in the prospective beneficiary state (Aubut, 2004, pp. 4-5). In today's usage of the concept of good governance, the meaning is twofold. One is related to the World Bank and mainly takes into account the administration and management aspects. The other one is linked with Western political powers and is somewhat concerned about politics. It is mainly democracy and development. The principle of most donor institutions is that good governance must be characterized by citizen participation in decision-making, the rule of law, equity and inclusiveness, transparency, participation, accountability, responsiveness, consensus, legitimacy, effectiveness, and efficiency.

After the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi, the country faced problems with establishing good governance mainly due to scarcity of institutional, financial, human, and material resources. However, over the past two decades, Rwanda has made giant strides in entrenching good governance principles and abiding by them. According to a statement made by the United Nations Development Programme – UNDP on Democratic Governance in Rwanda, “although institutions, systems, and human capacity had been destroyed in the aftermath of the genocide, Rwanda has painfully rebuilt the whole governance structure. It was done through the periods of emergency, rehabilitation, and reconstruction, up to the present endeavor of NST1 – National Strategy for Transformation”. In another statement formulated by the German Development Agency – GIZ in its report on Decentralization and Governance in Rwanda for 2016-2018, the country is recognized as having carried out a tremendous integrated decentralization reform for the previous 20 years. Highlighted mainly are legal, institutional, and political sectors. A few examples of these achievements include introducing the civil servants' service contracts – Imihigo destined to step up efficiency and accountability. Rwanda is reported to have already succeeded in this. The communities are also reported to have access to a variety of basic services and a platform to participate in decision-making.

In his article, “Conflict in the Great Lakes Region; Root Causes, Dynamics and Effects”, Patrick Kanyangara (2016) says that introducing democracy and elections in the region has only sparked off violence instead of bringing good governance. He expresses the idea that, while most texts about democracy relate it with non-violence, it is paradoxical that in this

region, the democratization effort has often been accompanied by conflict and violence. The more political systems attempted to lay the platform for good governance principles like political pluralism, freedom of expression, the right to demonstrate, fair and free elections – the more conflict and violence occurred. He concludes that that has paved the way to a tendency in the region to go for other forms of mild authoritarianism thought to bring about national cohesion and discourage tribal and ethnic conflict.

## **The African Crisis**

An analysis that was recently put in the limelight by the African Capacities Assessment Project – ACAPS, a think tank based in Geneva-said that most of the humanitarian crises observed in 2017 were likely to worsen, coupled with the diminishing humanitarian budgets. A similar study done the following year analyzed 17 prevailing humanitarian crises in the world, some of which had a direct impact on African nations like Central Africa (Seleka and Anti-Balaka), The Democratic Republic of the Congo (conflicts in eastern Congo), Ethiopia (demonstrations), Libya (Chalifa Bilkasim Haftar), Mali (the fight between the Dogon and the Fulani), Nigeria (Boko Haram), Rwanda – Uganda (Alleged Uganda's support to Rwandan armed opposition groups), Somalia (Islamist military group Al-Shabaab) and South Sudan (Salva Kiir Mayardit and Riek Machar).

William A. Joseph et al. (2000) suggests that the African crisis is marked by antagonistic forces entrenched between dictatorial and democratic tendencies resulting from the urge for growth, the problem of embezzlement, corruption, and the push for accountability. In Eastern and Western Africa, ACAPS' report indicated food insecurity as a shared main concern and pressing security needs for people internally displaced. The report went on to warn about limited funds, lack of adequate health facilities, and poor humanitarian access to communities in distress. Population displacement across areas affected by the conflict on the continent directly impacts the economy, politics, and society and hinders its development. The report indeed reveals that the previous month, 2.7 million people had been freshly displaced on the continent, with an estimated 15,000 individuals being forced from their areas every day. With market disruption and reduction of access to economy-oriented activities, there is an exacerbation of malnutrition, extreme poverty, and environmental pollution and degradation. This status jeopardizes the resilience of the communities and exerts extreme pressure upon the humanitarian assistance available. Particularly the African Great Lakes Region is still unstable. Various rebel groups destabilize the region. So, Africa faces some thorny challenges. In addition to its secular marginalization on the world market, the continent is embedded in a health crisis emanating from the devastating effects of HIV/AIDS and Malaria.

Another African crisis is its debts and their impact on the borrower states. In a study by Joshua Greene (1989), he shows how this debt is a source of despair for the continent. The 230 billion pounds of African debt is said to be quasi equal to 3 times its yearly income in

exports. It is a handicap to recovery and growth. According to research by UNICEF, about 1000 people perish daily in Africa due to this crisis. These scholars estimate that the continent can develop economically only if it manages to surmount the crisis.

According to Samir Amin (1974), although the African debt is much less than what is noticed in other regions of the world, it is the most worrisome globally, given that it must be refunded from somewhat limited incomes.

## Leadership

After the 1994 Rwandan genocide against the Tutsi, Africa's Great Lakes Region became a theater of political conflict characterized by political turmoil. This situation is partly caused by the absence of good dedicated political leaders and supportive institutions in these states. Since 1996, Zaire, which later turned into the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), has been scourged by insecurity, especially in the Eastern part of this country. The International Rescue Committee (IRC) survey shows that nearly four million people were killed from war-related causes in the DRC since 1998, the largest documented death toll in a conflict since World War.

Additionally, this insecurity in the region has triggered a huge influx of refugees into Tanzania from the countries in turmoil, and this has affected the country ecologically and environmentally, seriously impacting households in terms of food shortage. Given the civil war in South Sudan, as well as the political instability in Burundi and the Central African Republic, the author of "Global Leadership Initiatives for Conflict Resolution and Peacebuilding (Ilunga, 2018) suggests that for this region to be peaceful and stable, it should be analyzed how suitable governing policies could be worked out and harmonized to form a common working framework for all.

According to the same author, almost all the conflicts in the region are politically, economically, socially, and ethnically motivated. The establishment and promotion of regional and inclusive security mechanisms are crucial to foster stability and peace. The political leaders in these countries would then strengthen these regional peace mechanisms enshrining the same policies in their respective domestic security systems. The crisis in the region is so complex that it requires the leaders to be more responsive and transit from nationalistic feelings to a more regional and inclusive approach.

Edoro Elijah (2005) argues that since the conflicts in the Great Lakes Region are intertwined, their resolution necessitates a concerted regional approach. He also argues that the related bilateral systems have only been rather more aggressive than constructive. It is as though the frameworks have been put in place, not for regional cooperation but for regional conflict. Edoro suggests that Rwanda has the best chances of becoming a major actor in molding regional security models. With the DRC and Rwanda having jointly decided to forge a partnership against armed attacks as well as solid diplomatic ties, this is quite a giant step ahead.

## **Colonialism**

Being a densely populated region with roughly 107 million people, in pre-colonial times, the African Great Lakes Region was organized in states, economically specialized broadly in cattle keeping and banana and cereal farming. The most powerful kingdoms were Rwanda, Burundi, Buganda, and Bunyoro. Others included Toro, Ankole, and Karagwe. The Great Lakes Region had long been seen as the source of the River Nile, thus making it of prime European interest, attracting most of the early explorers and missionaries. The missionaries were the pioneer Europeans to arrive in this region in some numbers. Although they failed in converting the local population, they lay a foundation for the colonialists who arrived later. A country is colonized if it is controlled by a more powerful one (Todorff, 2002). The countries of the African Great Lakes Region were colonized by Great Britain (Kenya, Malawi, Tanzania, and Uganda), Germany (Tanzania, Rwanda, and Burundi), and Belgium (The Democratic Republic of the Congo, Burundi, and Rwanda). This colonization took place after the 1885 Berlin Conference of 1884/5 in Germany, which paved the way for the partition of Africa. The strife for independence started in the aftermath of World War II when the formerly powerful states of Europe were in a financial nightmare and could hardly run their overseas domains. It was during the 1930-1945 World Great Depression. Most African countries got back their independence between 1950 and the early 1960s.

Nevertheless, the post-colonial era was marked by a new type of colonialism dubbed Neocolonialism, conducted under capitalism, globalization, and cultural imperialism (Sartre, 1956). Other forms of new colonialism include Non-Alignment (Non-Aligned World) and *Françafrique*.

## **African Politics**

The most outstanding developmental aspect in African politics observable since the early 1990s is democratization through acceptance of the multiparty system, with which democratically elected governments have replaced military dictatorships in almost the whole of Africa, including the Great Lakes Region. However, according to Professor William Todorff (2002), those African countries in crisis are traversing a time of difficulty marked by a lack of constitutionally powerful institutions. He suggests that many leaders in Africa have erected personal empires instead of putting up national institutions. Bearing in mind that democracy is a new concept for Africans, people, and leaders, for that matter, have in their memory and still cherish what used to happen at the king's court or the chief's home. The tributes and gifts formerly given to the chiefs to influence their decision have taken a modern form dubbed corruption. For that African leader, a gift is not a problem. It is not abuse, seen from the traditional African perspective.

Again, from the traditional African perspective, the king was the intermediary between divinity and his people. He was far above other humans and therefore unquestionable. He

was always right and never wrong. It is rather difficult to impose the rule of law upon a true African leader with that backdrop. He is above the law, even the constitution!

Africa is a huge and highly diversified continent with a total of 54 countries. Lumping up all these nations and talking of African politics could be erroneous since their differences are clear-cut. For instance, there is an apparent distinction between the Northern states and Sub-Sahara from the cultural perspective. Also, geographically and demographically, there is a big difference, for example, between the vast Democratic Republic of the Congo and small countries like Rwanda and Burundi. On the other hand, there is a sharp contrast between Nigeria, a huge and oil-rich country, with the Gambia.

### **Weak Parliamentary Powers**

In most African countries, it would be difficult to implement democracy when there is no separation of powers from the executive and the Legislative and judiciary bodies. Taking the example of Uganda, an individual is a member of parliament and holds a ministerial portfolio at the same time. It inevitably and directly affects one of the prime roles of the legislative body in controlling the government. A Member of Parliament who is also a minister cannot easily question another minister or the Head of State for embezzlement, corruption, or public power abuse. What follows is usually a stalemate or a crisis.

There has often been a tendency in African countries for military intervention in politics that usually ending in a military takeover. It has been, in many cases, a result of the non-conformity of many African leaders to their campaign manifestos. They promise democracy with constitutionalism, but they turn into autocrats when they are already in the presidential seat.

People have also witnessed parliamentary amendments to the constitution, especially regarding fundamental laws such as the one about the presidential terms. Such complicity between the parliament and the presidency strongly undermines democracy and engenders a loss of trust among the electorate.

### **Regular, Free, and Fair Elections**

The constitution sets standards and criteria of age, and these vary from state to state. For example, the voting age in Rwanda is 18 years, but it may be a different case in Belgium. Prohibited from voting or being voted are those that have once been convicted of any crime.

Certain countries of the Great Lakes Region tend to impose democratic rights restrictions like freedom of expression, freedom of political activity under the guise of state security, order, and peace. For over a couple of decades, Electoral monitoring and observation are becoming part of any electoral process. Taking the example of Kenya, the 2017 electoral period attracted 102 domestic and international missions bringing in 54,000 people to check the process. The International Conference on the Great Lakes Region (ICGLR) is planning

to ensure the Electoral bodies in the region are empowered to reduce rights violations and any resultant violence that may follow.

## **Campaign**

Research done on Kenya's elections of 2013 argues that a "peace narrative" was highly promoted to discourage any protest, taking into account the tragedy of the violence that raged after the 2007/2008 elections. Indeed, it worked.

This parameter explains the prevailing tendency of peace messaging to rise. The only concern now is that this attitude may turn out to foster chronic peace-messaging manipulated at the detriment of democracy. The research also argues that the tendency is most intense in states having a history of rights violations and a low level of democratization.

In a country like Rwanda, all candidates are offered equal rallying opportunities in the country's stadiums and on similar grounds, and they all benefit from the same time slot on national media – radio and TV. There is no such concept as peace-messaging since the political rallies of post-genocide have always been conducted peacefully. However, the candidate's and people's language should be void of anything to do with the genocide ideology.

## **Civic Education**

This education can be in several different formats: formal class, informal sessions, experimental apprenticeship, mass communication sessions, etc. Civic education can be destined for young people or adults. The ulterior motive of civic education is to instill the thirst for democracy and good governance.

With civic knowledge, the citizen has a clear picture of how the political system works and is well aware of his/her rights and freedoms but also his/her responsibilities. The citizens also acquire civic skills. With this, they can make analyses and evaluations of public issues and defend their positions.

Good civic education should inform the beneficiaries about the content of their country's constitution because this and other texts could explain the functioning of their governments. It should also make them understand the relationship between the politics of their nation with neighboring states, the regional and international community.

In a research carried out by Interpeace – an international organization devoted to the prevention of violence and building lasting peace, operating in Africa, the Middle East, Asia, Europe, and Latin America, they realized that the conflicts in Burundi, Rwanda, and DRC had had strong effects particularly on the youths of that part of Africa, hurting them physically and psychologically. These youths also constitute the core component of the armed factions willingly or by force and strongly believe violence is the sole means of resolving their problems.

In this organization's conference in Nairobi in December 2014, which theme was centered upon ending the vicious circle of youth participation in violence for sustainable peace in the area, the participants emphasized the necessity of reinforcing ethical and moral values among youth. It would help ensure that these young people can be agents of positive change. Although it was underscored that intervention on the humanitarian side was indispensable, it was also stressed that lasting peace would be attained via individual behavioral and attitudinal transformation. It would help people to adopt dialog as a mode of resolving important issues. It was further stipulated that one way that could be achieved was through peace education, recognized by Burundi, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Rwanda, Uganda, UNESCO, and the International Conference on the Great Lakes Region (ICGLR) as a crucial element in fostering positive change in the region.

In Rwanda, civic education locally referred to as “Uburere Mboneragihugu” is a process that has been designed to teach and share national values that have been highlighted in this post-genocide era. The programme has been tailored to train the citizens with the aim of nurturing them into patriots that can willingly engage in national development.

### **Voter Registration**

In Rwanda, allowed to be registered for voting are all Rwandans of 18 years of age minimum or those who will have reached that age on the day the election will be held. It can be done domestically in Rwandan villages – Imidugudu or outside the country in embassies (Law Governing Elections in Rwanda Chapter 1 article 10). The Election Management Body in Rwanda is the National Electoral Commission – NEC (Law governing elections in Rwanda Chapter 1 article 7).

According to the New Times of July 22, 2018, any person who has been convicted for crimes to do with Rwanda's genocide against the Tutsi, such as the killing itself, rape, child sexual abuse, etc., is not allowed to vote, and therefore cannot be on voters' registry. However, the newspaper states, the courts are the ones to ascertain whether or not a person who has committed other crimes has the right to vote when their sentence has ended. A refugee and a person on trial are not allowed to vote.

### **Freedom of Choice**

Freedom of choice here refers to the freedom to vote for the candidate of one's choice. Given that in a democratic setting, a voter casts his/her ballot in privacy, one would conclude that, in this case, the voters have the freedom to vote for their preferred candidate. It has recently been facilitated by introducing the new concept of electoral observers to ensure no fraud occurs in and around the voting booth. Under such circumstances, the only person deprived of the right to choose is the one who does not have that right according to the law or a person who has some physical handicap impeding him/her from going to vote. The



latter has a right to delegate a close relative, although there is no guarantee that their choice will always be respected.

## Well-Motivated Independent Electoral Commissions

The electoral body has the role of conducting and coordinating all election-related functions. The task of resolving all problems linked with elections also falls in its mandate. The independent Electoral Model is conceived so that it does not receive orders from the executive and handles its budget independently. Some states recognized to have independent electoral bodies are United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, South Africa, Poland, Jordan, Romania, India, Pakistan, Nigeria, Thailand, and Sri Lanka.

Since it is not easy to separate the executive from the Legislative and the Judiciary in Africa and the Great Lakes Region, it would not be an easy task to isolate the Electoral Body and pretend it is independent. It remains under the powers of the government that indeed put it into being.

## Conclusion

With its quasi-temperate climate, rich soils, and a good number of inhabitants, the African Great Lakes Region has the potential of being a socioeconomic center of gravity for the rest of the continent. Moreover, all that the region needs to get to that status is, first of all, to harness all the necessary tools to get out of conflict and violence. One of the tools toward that could be radical institutional reform to underpin good governance, strong civil society platforms; dynamic civic education; inclusive democratic government institutions; genuine separation of executive, legislative, and judiciary powers, as well as freedom of expression. The region also needs strong regional partnerships to end the prevailing bilateral misunderstandings. These could be Africa's Great Lakes prerequisites for lasting peace and prosperity.

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