A REPORT OF THE CSIS AFRICA PROGRAM

Assessing Risks to Stability in Sub-Saharan Africa

Authors
Richard Downie
Jennifer G. Cooke

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CONTENTS

Acknowledgments iv

Introduction: Lessons from North Africa 1

An Overview of the 10 Countries 2

Methodology 5

Common Drivers of Change and Instability 9

Responses to Change 13

Triggers of Change 14

Conclusion 15

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ASSESSING RISKS TO STABILITY IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

Richard Downie and Jennifer G. Cooke[1]

Introduction: Lessons from North Africa

When a series of antigovernment protests broke out in Tunisia in the final weeks of 2010, few people outside the region paid much attention. Even those who took note of the unusual turn of events—public demonstrations were, after all, almost unheard of in Tunisia—could barely have imagined what lay in store. Within weeks, a regime that had seemed untouchable had crumbled, and President Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali had fled the country. The repercussions of Tunisia's revolution were felt across the region and beyond. Policymakers in the United States scrambled to make sense of events and reevaluate their assumptions of what was possible in the region. Before they could reach any conclusions, the Egyptian revolution toppled one of Africa's longest-standing rulers, Hosni Mubarak. A rebellion in eastern Libya left Colonel Muammar el-Qaddafi clinging desperately to power and resorting to indiscriminate force in an attempt to restore order, drawing the United States, NATO, and others into a military campaign that would have seemed inconceivable at the turn of the year. Significant protests broke out in Algeria and Morocco as well, spilling into the Middle East.

The upheavals in North Africa and the dizzying speed at which they took place left policymakers at a loss. While it is clear that no one could have predicted what happened, the fact that no one had even appeared to entertain the possibility of events unfolding in the way they did raises troubling questions about the assumptions made about countries and the strength of the contingency plans put in place to deal with unexpected events.

Developments in North Africa highlight the importance of delving below the surface of day-to-day events—the social protests, political crises, and violent upheavals—to seek out the underlying fault lines that help to explain them. The self-immolation of a young Tunisian man in December 2010 did not in itself cause the revolution that brought down President Ben Ali, but it expressed in the most dramatic way the structural and historic problems that have affected that society: unemployment, the frustrations of educated youth and their limited opportunities in life, political sterility, abuses by the security services, and anger at the corrupt clique that surrounded the president. It was a one-off event that crystallized the shared grievances of Tunisians and gave them energy and direction. Understanding the underlying social, economic, and political vulnerabilities that may drive change does not ensure definitive predictions of future events, but it helps in identifying potentially catalytic events or trends and likely triggers.

So far, the contagion of the Arab Spring has not passed below the Sahara, although citizens in Sudan, Uganda, Burkina Faso, Djibouti, and Mauritania have very likely drawn inspiration from the phenomenon in mounting relatively sustained protests against their governments. There is

1. Jennifer G. Cooke is director of the CSIS Africa Program. Richard Downie is deputy director.

no question that African leaders and their citizens have been closely watching events play out in the northern edge of the continent and have been drawing their own lessons, reevaluating power dynamics, and adjusting calculations of what they can realistically expect and extract from each other. All this points to a more urgent need to take a careful look at a wide cross-section of countries in sub-Saharan Africa and challenge some of the assumptions that underpin generally accepted narratives of how they work and how assured they are of continued stability.

Two broad elements determine a country's vulnerability to destabilizing crisis. First is the depth, intensity, and cumulative effect of structural weaknesses and faultlines. But equally important is the country's ability to manage and mitigate those structural factors in a way that makes any shocks to the system less potentially dangerous.

This study examines potential fissures and stressors that might lead in the coming decade to significant social dislocation or political instability in the 10 countries presented. The case studies are not intended to offer hard and fast predictions about the future. Each sketches out potential scenarios for the next 10 years, but the purpose of these scenarios is to illustrate how different dynamics and underlying vulnerabilities might converge to create the conditions for instability. Few, if any, of the countries in this series are at imminent risk of breakdown. All of them have coping mechanisms that militate against conflict, and discussions of potential "worst-case scenarios" have to be viewed with this qualification in mind.

An Overview of the 10 Countries

The 10 countries that make up this study are diverse—in historical experience, in geography, in political and economic development, in social cohesion, and in the breadth and frequency of previous destabilizing episodes. African states in the coming decade will face many common challenges—population growth, rapid urbanization, growing political demands, disruptions caused by climate change, and increasing demand for water, land, and other resources. But these common challenges will intersect in each of the countries examined with a unique set of strengths and vulnerabilities. An important purpose of this study is to move away from broad generalizations about African states and continent-wide "trend lines" and instead examine how an individual country's history, economy, political evolution, and social makeup create potential vulnerabilities and shape its ability to withstand a variety of stressors.

In assessing future vulnerability and resilience, a number of these case studies emphasize the profound influence that the colonial experience played in deepening social divides—whether on regional, ethnic, religious, or class lines. Understanding the depth and durability of these fissures requires an understanding of how colonial powers manipulated social identities and gave preference to certain groups above others. Preferential treatment did not simply entail higher political standing, but included access to education, land, and economic opportunity, creating deep social inequities and resentments that persist today and cannot easily be erased by short-term policy fixes. The transition to independence and the evolution and basis of legitimacy of the postindependence political elite also played an important role in shaping norms for political accommodation and compromise.

The 10 Study Countries: Angola, Botswana, Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, Rwanda, Senegal, Sudan, Uganda

Source: Detailed vector map of Africa with border states, © iStockphoto.com/AVvector/Andrea Venanzi.

Politically, the 10 countries are situated along a wide spectrum. Although all 10 nominally describe themselves as democracies and conduct elections at fairly regular intervals, their commitment to the substantive elements of democracy—including political pluralism, accountability, genuine electoral competition, and civil liberties—varies widely. Many of the countries in the study can be characterized as undergoing the "growing pains" of democracy, which bring with them the heightened risk of instability in the short term due to the imperfect nature of the process but hold out a greater chance of stability in the long term. Ghana, Senegal, and Kenya are the only countries that have had peaceful, democratic changes of government from one party to another. Botswana has a history of free and fair elections, but the same party has held power since independence. Nigeria's democratic record under civilian rule has been marred by large-scale voting fraud and considerable violence. None of these countries is a perfect democracy, but each, to a greater or lesser extent, has genuinely national institutions, outlets for voicing grievances, a history of elite bargaining and accommodation, and general momentum toward greater political openness that makes it more likely to manage periodic vulnerability over the longer term.

For the other countries—Ethiopia, Uganda, Rwanda, Sudan, and Angola—democracy has little meaning beyond the ritualistic holding of elections in which political space is severely constrained

and the winner is generally predetermined. Patronage and political coercion tend to be the preferred tools of political management. These countries show at present little movement toward greater openness to popular participation. With the exception of Sudan, these regimes enjoyed initial legitimacy because their leaders had put an end to devastating conflicts, but that initial social compact shows signs of fraying. Today their leaders appear to have staked their bid for legitimacy on economic growth rather than the outcome of an open political process, but it is very uncertain that economic growth alone will be sufficient to stave off growing political demands.

Among democracies and nondemocracies alike, few of the cases studied have robust, independent institutions such as judiciaries and legislatures, able to provide a countervailing balance or check to strong presidential power. Kenya adopted a new constitution in 2010 that devolves power away from the executive branch, but there is considerable uncertainty about how those changes will ultimately be implemented. In a number of countries—Kenya, Ghana, Senegal, and Nigeria—civil society, along with an emerging middle class, is becoming a more effective, sophisticated force for national change, but in others—Rwanda, Angola, Ethiopia, and Uganda—it is constrained and there are few possibilities for open debate or expressions of grievance.

In terms of economic growth, all 10 countries largely conform to the recent pattern across Africa, which as a continent has seen real GDP rise at 5 percent a year between 2000 and 2008, when the global economic crisis hit.[2] Most observers attribute this growth to new investors and more capable, competent economic and fiscal management. In some countries, growth has fluctuated widely because of over-dependence on a small number of export commodities, particularly oil and other natural resources. Nigeria, Angola, and Sudan are heavily reliant on petroleum exports. In the most extreme case, 98 percent of South Sudan's revenue comes from oil. Botswana's economic wealth is also tied to a significant extent on a single commodity: diamonds. As a result, the economic health of these countries is held hostage to the ups and downs of commodity prices on the world markets. Economic growth in Angola has fluctuated dramatically, falling from a staggering 23.9 percent in 2007 when oil prices peaked to 1.6 percent by 2010.[3] Resource dependency has other potentially destabilizing economic and social effects, creating enclave economies that fuel corruption and political mismanagement in countries where institutions are weak and lack transparency. Few countries have successfully used revenues from high-value commodities to invest in sectors that generate broader opportunities for employment and income generation. There is nothing deterministic about the "resource curse," as Botswana has demonstrated through a combination of sound economic policies and wise political management. Even there, however, diversifying the economy and generating employment opportunities for increasingly restive youth has proved elusive.

The question of whether economic growth can match population growth is an important one in the context of sub-Saharan Africa, where the overall population has recently topped 800 million and is expected to more than double by 2050. Population growth is one of several important structural trends that have the potential to destabilize African societies and will be discussed in more detail later in this paper.

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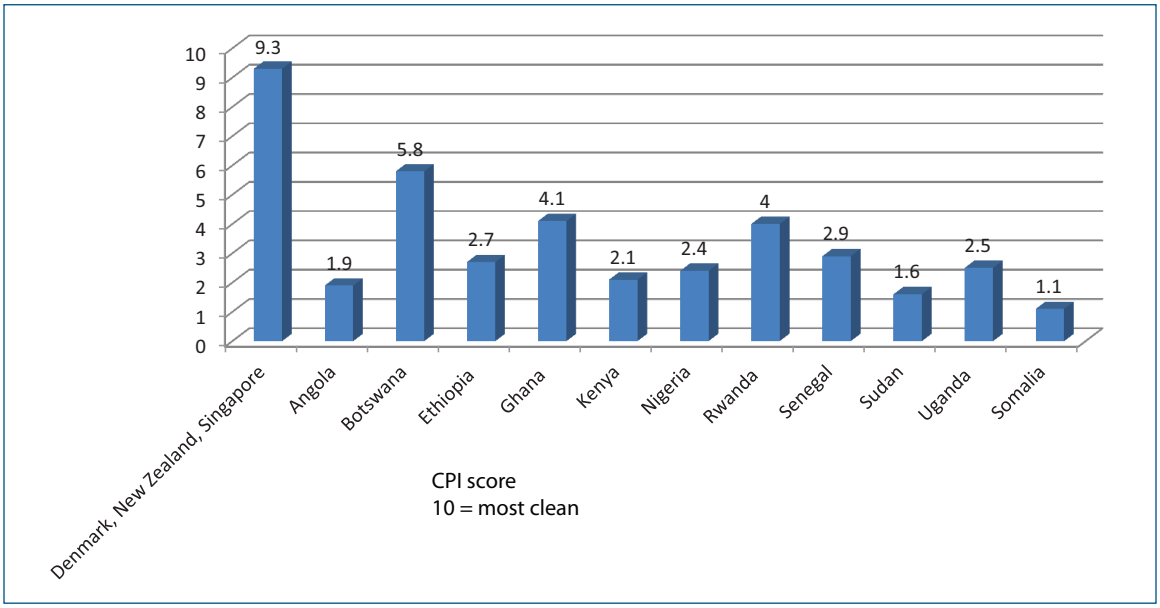
2. McKinsey & Company, *McKinsey on Africa: A Continent on the Move* (New York: McKinsey & Company, June 2010), p. 11, http://www.mckinsey.com/clientservice/Social_Sector/our_practices/Economic_Development/ Knowledge_Highlights/~/media/Reports/SSO/Africa_FULL_VF.ashx.

3. International Monetary Fund, "IMF Data Mapper," April 2011, http://www.imf.org/external/datamapper/index.php.

Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index 2010 Selected Scores



Scores for 10 study countries in comparison with world's highest and lowest scores.

Methodology

Although the 10 country studies that make up this collection have been written by different authors, a common analytical framework has been used to study the dynamics that are likely to cause instability during the next decade. This approach adopts a multilayered analysis looking at three sets of issues and the way they interact with one another. It involves:

- Identifying the underlying structural **conditions** in African countries that have the potential to cause instability. These are essentially long-term dynamics that are either static or change slowly over time. They could include such diverse phenomena as historical experience; the entrenchment and politicization of subnational identities; the evolution of the state and state legitimacy within society; population growth and age distribution; rates of urbanization; land and water scarcity and distribution; economic resource base; and unemployment rates.
- Identifying the **catalysts** of instability. In other words, what are the emerging dynamics and trends that, by attaching themselves to these structural conditions, further expose and multiply tensions? Possible examples include the closing or narrowing of channels for political expression and participation, political manipulation of social grievances, the effects of climate change on livelihoods, economic mismanagement and corruption, erosion of long-standing tools of political management and accommodation, the discovery of new natural resources such as oil or diamonds, and the growth of criminal networks.
- Identifying possible "**triggers**." These are one-off events that animate the volatile mixture of unstable conditions and catalysts, causing them to explode into episodes of instability. Possible triggers include elections, economic shocks, natural disasters, and the death or removal of a political leader.

The interplay of these three dynamics—conditions, catalysts, and triggers—helps to determine the extent of a country's vulnerability. A country may have a host of underlying conditions that are liable to cause instability but will remain calm without the catalysts and triggers that give them disruptive properties and bring them to the surface. In a similar way, the impact of a destabilizing one-off event will be lessened if it does not tap into preexisting grievances. The chart below summarizes the most salient dynamics that emerged for each of the 10 countries in the study.

Ultimately, this is not a scientific study into instability. While quantitative data has been used to support the analysis, the authors have made a qualitative assessment based on their expertise, experience, and discussions with a diverse range of people in their study country. In addition, this project is not an attempt to predict instability but rather to identify the most likely sources from which it might emanate. Already , as the study went to print, a number of vulnerabilities identified in the case studies were playing out in different ways: sustained violent protests in Uganda, unprecedented strikes in Botswana, demonstrations against proposed electoral changes in Senegal, and intensifying rifts between the ruling party in Rwanda and erstwhile loyalists.

Instability will mean different things in different contexts, and for this reason the authors have tried to define the range of possibilities within their country study. Botswana, for example, is not a country that is likely to collapse into civil war in the next 10 years, but it is possible to imagine a scenario where economic hardship, perhaps caused by a fall in diamond prices, leads to limited episodes of industrial and social unrest. In the case of Sudan, the range of possibilities is far wider and starker. Given its history of conflict and the formidable set of economic, political, and security pressures it currently faces, any definition of instability would have to include war, widespread ethnic violence, and even the disintegration of the state itself.

Finally, a sense of balance must be introduced into the discussion. Though the focus of this study is on instability, it is important to remember that disorder and chaos are not inevitable in these countries, despite the challenges they face. Each of the countries in this study has a set of inbuilt mechanisms that militate against conflict and instability. These dynamics vary from country to country but may include social cohesion, government capacity and responsiveness, functioning institutions, a professional military, strong national identity, robust traditional authority structures, a history of resolving disputes peacefully, and forums for elite bargaining.

Causes of Instability

Country	Conditions	Catalysts	Triggers
ANGOLA	Rapid urbanization Wealth disparity Narrowly based oil economy Separatist movement in oil-producing region	Falling oil prices Rising gap between expectations and delivery of public services Rising anger over corruption	Dos Santos' succession 2012 legislative elections Economic slump
BOTSWANA	Narrowly based diamonds economy Rapid urbanization	Falling global demand for diamonds Government inability to sustain welfare state Growing unemployment	Global economic recession Economic crisis in South Africa Drought
ETHIOPIA	Rapid population growth Rapid urbanization Regional insecurity Domestic insurgency Legacy of conflict	Rising food prices Economic growth fails to outstrip population growth Rising border tensions Growing dissent within ruling party	Meles' succession Ruling party split Military attack by a neighboring country or internal armed movement
GHANA	Rapid urbanization Over-centralized political system Decline of agricultural sector Land ownership disputes	Start of large-scale oil production Rise in drug trafficking Rising youth unemployment Patronage politics	Close or contested outcome to 2012 election
KENYA	Land distribution Ethnic cleavages Rapid urbanization	Political manipulation of ethnicity Failure to implement constitution Rising economic inequality Spillover of Somalia violence Land disputes	Close or contested outcome to 2012 election Conviction of leading politicians by International Criminal Court

Causes of Instability *(continued)*

NIGERIA	Narrowly based oil economy Regional inequalities and rivalries Ethnic and religious cleavages Poor governance and weak institutions	Political manipulation of ethnic/religious/regional differences Falling oil prices Corruption Zero-sum politics	Elections Breakdown of elite consensus Spike in violence in Niger Delta/Middle Belt/North-East Changes to federal arrangements
RWANDA	Legacy of the genocide Ethnic divisions Population density Unequal land tenure Economic inequalities	Economic slowdown Growing authoritarianism of the government Perceptions of ethnic favoritism Narrowing of political space Entanglements in DRC	Ruling party split or coup attempt Kagame's succession Crisis in DRC relations
SENEGAL	Rapid urbanization Young population Intra-religious tension Contested visions of role of religion in politics Separatist movement in Casamance	Rising unemployment Economic decline Unmet expectations of youth Political manipulation of youth Erosion of authority structures	Contested outcome to 2012 election Wade's succession
SUDAN (North)	Poor governance and legacy of violence and repression Highly centralized state Narrowly based oil economy Contested national identities	Economic decline Rising food prices Rising unemployment Contagion from North Africa upheavals Climate change Political manipulation of ethnic/regional/religious identities	Crisis in North-South negotiations Convergence of armed challenges on border/Darfur/East Ruling party split Coup attempt Halt in oil production Arrest of Bashir by International Criminal Court

Causes of Instability *(continued)*

SUDAN (South)	Security vacuum Lack of infrastructure Ethnic/regional/religious cleavages Scarce resources Poverty Legacy of conflict	Political manipulation of ethnic grievances Falling oil prices Rising border insecurity Failure to provide public services Growing authoritarianism of government	Crisis in North-South negotiations Ruling party split Botched disarmament Internal armed uprisings or attack by North
UGANDA	Regional/ethnic/religious cleavages Legacy of violence Militarization of politics	Falling government revenue Rising inflation Rising corruption Transition into oil economy Heavy-handed responses to social protest	Museveni's succession Ruling party split Terrorist attack from Somalia Influx of refugees from South Sudan

Common Drivers of Change and Instability

Although the 10 countries in this study are diverse, they share some common characteristics and pressures. A set of demographic, social, climatic, and technological shifts are bringing about rapid change in sub-Saharan Africa. Many of these forces have the potential to produce destabilizing consequences unless ways are found to respond to them.

Population growth and employment: The population of sub-Saharan Africa is rising rapidly. It recently hit 800 million, and the United Nations estimates that it will more than double to 1.9 billion by 2050.[4] This surge in growth presents enormous possibilities and risks. The expansion of the working-age cohort has the potential to trigger a surge in economic growth, presenting Africa with a golden opportunity to reap a "demographic dividend" by expanding its middle class and tackling the persistent poverty that continues to blight the lives of so many of its citizens. At the same time, governments will face growing pressure to meet the demands of their increasingly youthful populations for education and employment opportunities. The upheavals in North Africa underscore the dangers of failing to address the aspirations of young people, particularly for jobs. All 10 countries in this study suffer from high levels of unemployment or underemployment, probably much higher than official statistics suggest.

Rapid urbanization: Africans are moving to cities and urban areas in greater numbers than ever before. Nine of the world's top 20 fastest growing cities are in Africa.[5] Cities like Lagos, Luanda,

4. UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, "World Population Prospects: The 2010 Revision," http://esa.un.org/unpd/wpp/index.htm.

5. City Mayors Statistics, "The world's fastest growing cities and urban areas from 2006 to 2020," http://www.citymayors.com/statistics/urban_growth1.html.

and Nairobi are growing at a rate of up to 4 percent each year.[6] Africa's population is on track to become a majority urban one by around 2030.[7] Growth at such an unmanageable scale will test the capacity of governments to provide urban services and contain social protest. Ever-expanding slum areas will become focal points for disorder, crime, and disease. Demands for urban services emerge as important destabilizing forces in several of the country studies, including Angola, Senegal, and South Sudan. Unchecked urbanization will also place strain on food production as more people abandon jobs in the agricultural sector in the hope of finding better employment prospects in the cities.

Technological change: The growth of information technology in Africa has the capacity to drive change more quickly than in the past, and in unpredictable ways. Technology tends to narrow the space between ruler and ruled, allowing people to challenge their leaders more easily and effectively. Improved communications make it more difficult for governments to control or restrict the flow of information to their citizens or to keep abuses hidden from public view. The use of social media by antigovernment protestors in North Africa has been one of the themes of the upheavals in that region. Technology is a two-way street, however, and some governments such as the one in Ethiopia have become adept at using high-tech methods to block communications and prevent their citizens from mobilizing effectively. While Internet penetration is lower in sub-Saharan Africa than other regions, it is rapidly catching up. The installation of submarine fiber-optic cables off the west and east coasts of Africa is improving Internet connectivity and bringing down the price of Internet use for ordinary people.

More important has been the penetration of mobile phone technology. Africans owned more than 300 million mobile telephone handsets in 2009.[8] Phones not only assist communication, they have also spurred economic growth, enabling, for example, farmers to check the price of their produce before deciding whether to go to the market to sell their goods. Mobile phones have also facilitated a banking revolution, allowing people without accounts to receive money transfers from friends and family abroad. Phones installed with cameras and global positioning system (GPS) devices have enabled human rights abuses to be recorded and been used by civil society groups to monitor elections and check for voting fraud. More than any other form of technology, mobile phones have helped close the information gap in Africa, helping citizens communicate with each other more effectively and monitor their governments more closely.

Economic imbalances: In all of the study countries, economic inequalities are a source of division and potential conflict. These inequalities play out in different ways. Two of the most important are the rural-urban divide and the intra-urban divide. Although sub-Saharan Africa is rapidly urbanizing, only Botswana and Angola of all the countries in the study, have a majority urban population. Elsewhere, the majority rural population tends to survive on subsistence agriculture; a move to the city is seen as a way out of poverty but often becomes a source of frustration when money-making opportunities are hard to come by and the gap between rich and poor is wider and more obvious. Unequal wealth distribution is a potent source of grievance and a potential driver of conflict. Another fault line of economic inequality is exacerbated in countries in which high-value natural resources are the basis of national wealth. Resources such as petroleum and diamonds tend

6. Ibid.

7. UN Habitat, *The State of African Cities 2010: Governance, Inequality and Urban Land Markets* (Nairobi: UN Habitat, November 2010), p. 1, http://www.unhabitat.org/documents/SACR-ALL-10-FINAL.pdf.

8. Jasper Grosskurth, *Futures of Technology in Africa*, STT no. 75 (The Hague: STT Netherlands Study Center for Technology Trends, 2010), p. 40, http://www.stt.nl/uploads/documents/192.pdf.

to create enclave economies that concentrate rents in the hands of a small elite, incentivize corruption and patronage as political management tools, and rarely generate broad-based employment or economic development. The differentials in wealth have often stoked grievances in the exploited regions, which, if unaddressed, can explode into violence, as they have done in oil-producing regions such as the Niger Delta in Nigeria and Cabinda in Angola.

Environmental degradation and resource stress: The combined impacts of population and livestock growth on already fragile environments have increased competition for scarce natural resources such as land and water. The resulting tensions are an important condition of conflict in many of the study countries. In Darfur and South Sudan, for example, competition for shrinking pasture or water sources has aggravated existing cleavages between pastoralists and agriculturalists and exposed rivalries between and among ethnic groups. All of these pressures are exacerbated by the unequal distribution of land, environmental destruction caused by resource extraction and intensive farming, and the effects of climate change.

Income Inequality

Country	Gini Coefficient (higher scores denote more inequality)*
Angola	59
Botswana	60.5
Ethiopia	30
Ghana	40.8
Kenya	42.5
Nigeria	43.7
Rwanda	46.8
Senegal	41.3
Sudan	Data not available
Uganda	45.7

Source: UN Development Program, *Human Development Report 2009: M Economy and inequality* (New York: UN Development Program, 2009), http://hdrstats.undp.org/en/indicators/161.html.

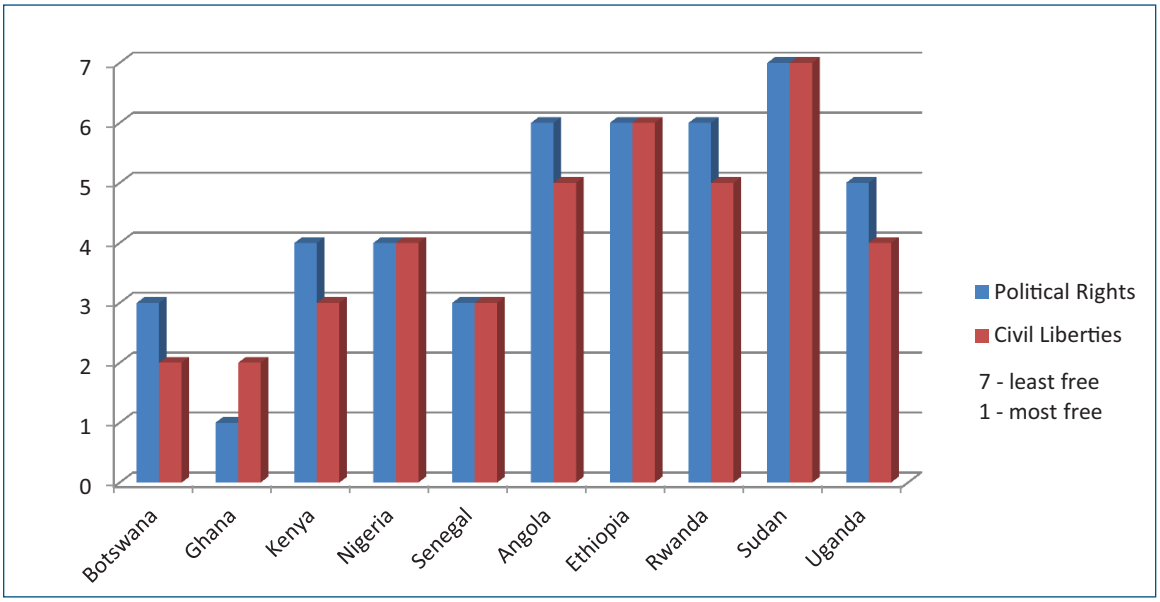
* With the exception of Angola, data are from 2007. Most recent data for Angola are from 2000.

Ethnicity: Ethnicity is perhaps the most important form of identity in sub-Saharan Africa, and all 10 countries in the study are ethnically diverse. All 10 suffer tensions along ethnic lines, to a greater or lesser extent. But ethnicity does not tend to be a cause of violence in itself. Instead, as the most common form of self-identification, it is the one that is most commonly manipulated by unscrupulous operators, such as politicians, chiefs, and militia leaders. It is the hook upon which other grievances are hung and the easiest way to mobilize one group against another. Kenyans did not always define themselves so strongly according to ethnic group; their political leaders have encouraged them to do so by turning politics into a game of "us against them," a battle for the lion's share of limited resources in which ethnicity is used as a crude method of identifying the

competitors. It is no coincidence that self-identification along ethnic lines peaks at election time. Rwanda provides the clearest example of the dangers of ethnic polarization, but again, the degree to which ethnicity is a root cause of conflict is open to debate in a country where ethnic markers were largely imposed and consolidated by ruling elites.

Religion: Although religion is an important identity marker in all 10 countries in this study, for the most part, religious differences do not emerge as an important source of instability. Sudan is an anomaly, where elements of the National Congress Party in the North used Islam as a mobilizing tool against Southerners, who tend to follow Christianity or traditional religions. While religious cleavages are important in countries such as Nigeria, and instability often runs along the Christian-Muslim fault line, religion is not a root cause of violence, more a mobilizing force that tends to be manipulated by unscrupulous actors. Intra-religious differences are important in countries like Senegal, where President Abdoulaye Wade has been accused of favoring one Sufi sect, the Mourides, over the others. But in none of the 10 countries does religion emerge as a root cause of instability.

Freedom in the World 2011



Data source: Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2011: The Authoritarian Challenge to Democracy* (Washington, D.C.: Freedom House, January 2011).

Responses to Change

Although the 10 countries in this study share many common drivers of change and instability, it is in their responses to these changes that a clear distinction emerges between them. Botswana and Sudan represent extreme ends of the stability spectrum. The former is uncharacteristically stable by the standards of sub-Saharan Africa and faces few risks of widespread instability beyond the possibility of exposure to economic hardship caused by its reliance on a single export commodity. Sudan, both as a single entity and as separate North-South components, is uncharacteristically unstable and faces a conceivable risk of civil war or even state collapse. The remaining eight countries fall into two categories: the "democracies," which are supple enough to withstand instability, even extreme forms of instability; and the "autocracies," which use coercion and control to hold back the forces of change and volatility but ultimately risk falling victim to them. The terms democracy and autocracy are imprecise, shorthand ways of clustering diverse models of governance. Some of the democracies could more accurately be described as "aspiring" democracies or countries in the midst of democratization. Some, indeed most, of the autocracies hold regular elections and allow some forms of political contestation. Among those states termed democracies, elections and political participation essentially mean something substantial, and there is room for political contestation, accommodation, and debate, even if these tend to be largely confined to political elites. Among the autocracies, elections offer a veneer of democratic process but without the political space or fundamental freedoms that are essential to functioning democracies. For the purposes of this study, the countries belonging in the "democracies" category are Botswana, Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, and Senegal. The "autocracies" are Angola, Ethiopia, Rwanda, Sudan, and Uganda. The annual Freedom in the World survey, conducted by Freedom House, categorizes these countries in a similar way; the democracies have healthier scores for political rights and civil liberties than the second group (see chart on previous page).

The 10 study countries face a broad range of pressures and threats to stability. But ultimately, the democracies, which have found ways (however imperfect) to manage volatility and accommodate multiple competing demands, are more likely to rebound from shocks and respond to multiple strains, while the autocracies, which have largely relied on coercion to eliminate volatility, are more likely to buckle or overreact, unleashing unpredictable violence and jarring change. Democracies allow their people to let off steam by expressing their verdict on their governments at regular intervals. The quality of these elections varies across the 10 countries, but they do at least act as a safety valve to release pressure in the system. Democracies also tend to have more robust institutions, which resist efforts by corrupt leaders to use informal channels of governance. Again, they may be less functional in some states than others. But overall, institutions offer at least the appearance of accountability, professionalism, and transparency.

At first glance, this hypothesis appears to fly in the face of realities on the ground. The democracies often appear to be chaotic and unstable while the autocracies have at least a veneer of stability. Few visitors to Nigeria are struck by a sense of calm and stability. Indeed, Nigeria is racked by spasms of often extreme and widespread violence. Hundreds of people die each year in violence rooted in communal, religious, and regional antagonisms and shared anger at poor governance. Regions like the north-east, the Middle Belt, and the Niger Delta, are deeply scarred by conflict. Likewise, Kenya has endured periodic outbreaks of ethnically motivated violence generally coinciding with elections. The most recent followed the contested election outcome of December 2007, which sparked rioting, the deaths of up to 1,500 people, and the displacement of many hundreds

of thousands. Yet despite these setbacks, some of them severe, the overall integrity of the state holds together.

The autocracies, on the other hand, are characterized by long periods of apparent stability. Below the surface, however, pressure is mounting. It builds over time but ultimately has nowhere to go. Political participation is restricted, civil society is closely monitored or obstructed, the media is cowed. The government manages to contain rising pressures in various ways; through coercion, by co-opting elites, and by buying off opponents. Some of the more canny political operators can keep a lid on disquiet for extended periods of time. In a number of cases, economic growth, rather than political competition, becomes the prime source of ostensible legitimacy. But eventually something has to give, and opposition to these autocracies has a tendency to explode in ways that manifest themselves in the most serious forms of instability including regime overthrow, revolution, and civil war.

It is interesting to note that a recent history of violence and civil conflict tends to reinforce a country's tendency toward autocratic, immovable governance models. Governments and their people tend to enter into an unspoken pact whereby citizens agree to suppress their demands for democratic progress and public accountability in the "greater" interests of peace, stability, and economic growth. But this tacit agreement cannot hold indefinitely and merely tends to store up problems for the future. As the collective memories of civil conflict fade, a younger generation emerges that is less in thrall to the past and less willing to postpone their demands for more inclusive and accountable state-society relations to a yet-to-be-determined future date. Leaders in countries like Rwanda and Angola, who present the public with a false choice between stability or democracy, may find themselves facing an increasingly skeptical audience.

Triggers of Change

While each of the 10 countries in this study is unique, there is considerable overlap between the types of "flashpoint" events most likely to spark destabilizing change. The most common trigger events tend to fall into two categories, corresponding to regime type. Democracy may offer the best immunity against long-term instability, but it is a paradox that the main method for maintaining and refreshing the democratic system—elections—constitutes the single most dangerous trigger of instability in these countries. The zero-sum nature of African politics tends to heighten tensions at election time. The winner-takes-all mentality of most political parties means that the losing parties and their followers face the prospect of being deprived of influence, resources, and attention. In these circumstances, there is a temptation to resort to violence, both to ensure victory or to express displeasure at defeat. Nigeria recently emerged from elections that were widely regarded as the most credible since the restoration of civilian government, but they were also the most violent. More than 800 people are thought to have died, mainly in postelection disturbances in the north, which saw its preferred candidate defeated.[9] Looking ahead, 2012 is emerging as a key year for many of the democracies in this study, with Kenya, Senegal, and Ghana going to the polls in what promise to be closely contested and hard-fought elections. The stakes in all three countries are high; Kenya's previous presidential election ended in a contested result and one of the most serious outbreaks of violence since independence. In Senegal, the ferocity of opposition

9. Human Rights Watch, "Nigeria: Post-Election Violence Killed 800," May 16, 2011, http://www.hrw.org/en/news/2011/05/16/nigeria-post-election-violence-killed-800.

to President Wade has reached such a level in some quarters that, if he decides to stand and wins, the response could be violent, particularly in urban areas. In Ghana, which narrowly avoided election deadlock in 2007, the competition will be even more intense this time round, given that the winner will preside over the country's new-found oil wealth, a potentially lucrative source of patronage.

In autocratic states, where institutions are weak and the system of governance is defined by personal rule, political leadership crises are perhaps the most important trigger of instability. In Uganda, Ethiopia, Rwanda, and Angola, and in countries like Senegal, where democratic progress has faltered, the question of stability is closely tied to the head of state himself. In states that are characterized by personal rule, the potential for unexpected events to trigger highly destabilizing crises is multiplied. If the likes of Yoweri Museveni of Uganda, Paul Kagame of Rwanda, or Meles Zenawi of Ethiopia were to be suddenly struck down by a health emergency or removed in a coup d'état, the risks of major instability and prolonged crisis would be high. Indeed, many of these men emphasize their very personal role in maintaining stability, claiming that they are single handedly holding back the forces of chaos. Ironically, it is their very public claims of indispensability and reluctance to give up power or allow it to be shared with other individuals and institutions that increases the chances that their apocalyptic predictions will become self-fulfilling prophesies.

The succession issue looms large as a cause of instability in these countries. All of these leaders appear to share the misconception that they can somehow remain on the political scene forever. As a result, they are reluctant to plan for a future that does not include themselves at the center of power. If they can bear to contemplate a future out of office, they tend to console themselves with the notion that they will be able to pick their successor, often settling on a family member or close confidant. This approach is invariably unpopular, and its destabilizing potential is enhanced by the fact that it is a process invariably shrouded in secrecy and accompanied by political intrigue. Potential candidates jockey for position and spend their days trying to outmaneuver each other rather than running the country. Thus, the succession question is a lightning rod of instability, and the death or removal of an incumbent can trigger a destabilizing power vacuum as rival factions vie for control of the top office.

Conclusion

In any study that involves analysis of multiple countries, it is helpful to pick out common trends and make broad comparisons. Indeed, part of the purpose of this introduction has been to highlight some of the most important common dynamics that make them vulnerable to instability. However, comparisons only go so far, and it is important to avoid making sweeping generalizations. While it is true that the countries in this series share a set of common pressures, including population growth, rapid urbanization, youth unemployment, and climate change, each of these dynamics plays out in a different way when they interact with a unique set of vulnerabilities on the ground. Each country has a distinct history (and colonial experience), geography, culture, and ethnic composition. Each country has a different political and institutional structure, and a unique economic base. Each country has a distinct set of shock absorbers that militate against instability along with crisis management tools that vary in scope and effectiveness. For all these reasons, instability takes on different forms in different countries and crisis episodes play out along unique timelines and trajectories. Volatility is not always the best predictor of crisis and instability. And conversely, the absence of volatility is not an adequate gage of fundamental stability or resilience.

The task of this project is to highlight and assess the most pertinent stress points in each country and to identify the key trend lines that may serve as bellwethers for crisis or instability in the coming decade.

The fact that each country in this study faces a unique set of vulnerabilities and deals with its crises in different ways is something the United States should be keenly aware of as it considers its engagement strategies with each one. Responses to instability must be nuanced accordingly, and policymakers should refrain from seeking to apply quick fixes to outward manifestations of instability that do not tackle the driving forces that lie behind it. These are often linked to social, economic, and regional factors but in many cases coalesce around citizens' sense of frustration that their governments are failing to meet their expectations for jobs, services, political freedoms, and civil liberties. The upheavals in North Africa since the beginning of 2011 underline the dangers of ignoring these core grievances. For the United States, which counted the toppled regimes of Tunisia and Egypt as its allies, they underline the shortsightedness of failing to take a firm line with friendly nations on the need for good governance; not just because it is the right thing to do but because it is the best way of resolving crises and preserving long-term stability. Several of the most potentially vulnerable countries in this study—Uganda, Rwanda, and Ethiopia—are important allies of the United States in sub-Saharan Africa, partly because of the valuable security assistance they provide. At the same time, the activities of their governments and the methods they use to suppress legitimate political opposition at home tend to undermine security and contribute to longer-term vulnerability, even if, in the short term, they effectively suppress political volatility. These contradictions are not easy to resolve, and tensions are inherent in U.S. relations with many of its partners. But a failure to acknowledge or address them merely stores up trouble in the long term.

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