Silencing the guns in Africa beyond 2020: Challenges from a governance and political perspective

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Abstract: The need to silence the guns, and consolidate peace and stability in Africa is reflected in the African Union’s Agenda 2063, which calls for a peaceful and politically stable Africa. This paper examines the practicality of silencing the guns beyond 2020 and its associated challenges. To accomplish this, the paper employed a review of the relevant literature to examine whether guns can be silenced in Africa going forward. It suggests that silencing the guns beyond 2020 at this point is not possible. The legacies of colonialism, the role of external actors in the affairs of Africa and the increasing number of ethnoreligious conflicts are challenges that need to be addressed before the possibility of silencing the guns can be considered. AU member states need to forge unity on collectively resolving security issues. Failure to do so will see Africa continue to be at the mercy of armed conflicts, political instability and external actors.

Subjects: Governance; Governance - Politics & International Relations; Conflict Resolution

Keywords: Development; peace; conflict; cooperation

2. Introduction
It was hoped that in a postcolonial era, Africa would consolidate the principles of good governance, democracy, adherence to constitutionalism and the respect for human rights.

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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT
In this paper, I examine the contradictory assumptions, narratives and arguments regarding the concept of silencing the guns beyond 2020 in Africa and report on the political and governance challenges that can hinder this process. In a post-colonial era, there was great hope that Africa would be peaceful, characterised by stability and inclusive socio-economic development. However, on the contrary, Africa has been engulfed by conflict and violence, issues that have contributed greatly to population displacement, civilian deaths, refugees flows and stifled economic development. At the centre of these conflicts has been the inability of Africa stem to the illegal circulation illegal fire arms. This paper looks at the concept and practicality of silencing the guns beyond 2020, it looks at the role that ought to be played by African states, the challenges they face, prospects and whether Africa can silence the guns beyond 2020.
Such hope was born out of the realisation that under colonialism, African cultures, traditions, governance and political systems were replaced by colonial systems that ensured colonial domination and condemned Africa to underdevelopment and poverty (Tusosem, 2016; Lephakga, 2017 & Langan, 2017). Africans were slaves in their own continent but the period of decolonisation coincided with hopes of freedom and socio-economic and political development. However, contrary to such hopes, Africa has descended into a conflict-ridden continent, characterised by religious and ethnic conflicts. In 2019 there were 15 countries with active armed conflicts in sub-Saharan Africa: Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cameroon, the Central African Republic (CAR), Chad, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Ethiopia, Kenya, Mali, Mozambique, Niger, Nigeria, Somalia, South Sudan and Sudan (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2020). Violent political events, rooted in ethnic conflicts, have plagued sub-Saharan Africa since independence, causing millions of deaths and hampering economic development. In 1996, when the civil war broke out in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), it left more than 3.5 million civilians dead. In Nigeria the conflict with Boko Haram has resulted in the deaths of over 20,000 civilians and a large-scale humanitarian crisis. According to UN estimates, 300,000 people died and more than 2.5 million have been displaced in Sudan following months of mass protests in West Darfur. Although many of these contemporary wars are related to structural weaknesses, poor governance has become the major challenge and source of Africa’s predicament and socio-economic crises (Ylönen, 2009 & Ifeoma, 2011). Rather than placing great emphasis on party politics and the consolidation of strong democratic institutions, the governance and political structures in Africa have been shaped along ethnic and religious lines, which gives rise to conflict, as is the case in Nigeria, Central African Republic and South Sudan.

The Africa Union’s Agenda 2063 places great emphasis on a peaceful and secure Africa. The AU declaration of commitment to silence the guns by 2020 aimed at silencing all illegal weapons in Africa. There was a need to reduce the proliferation of small arms and the trafficking of weapons—a proliferation that still contributes considerably to the various conflicts in Africa today (Ehiane & Uwizeyimana, 2018). These protracted conflicts have been fuelled and sustained by the production, sale, and distribution of small arms and light weapons.

However, since its inception, the concept of silencing all illegal weapons in Africa by 2020 has always been in doubt, given Africa’s geography, the lack of political will to support the concept, the porosity of African borders, and the fragmentation of the political and governance institutions in the continent. Governance and politics in Africa have failed to evolve and work for the people, rather totalitarianism and suppressing dissent have become the norm, meaning that consolidating the idea of silencing the guns without addressing the governance and political challenges will be futile. To go further, this paper contends that the AU actually knew that silencing all illegal weapons in Africa by 2020 was practically impossible. Rather, it hoped that this would be used at some time in the future as a vehicle to bring about peace and stability, but this can only happen if the AU has the full support of all African states. This paper dwells on the current narratives of governance and political instability in Africa in order to understand the practicality of the silencing of the guns beyond 2020. From the start, this paper argues that silencing the guns in Africa beyond 2020 is currently an impossible given the nature of African politics and its related challenges. The paper contends that fragmented political and governance systems in Africa, characterised by a spectrum of democracies, semi-democracies and totalitarianism weaken the AU’s resolve to have a peaceful and politically stable Africa. In summary, this paper seeks to answer three important questions, namely, what are the prospects of silencing the guns in Africa beyond 2020? What are the challenges faced by the AU in its quest to silence the guns and, going forward, what steps are needed from a political and governance perspective to make the concept of silencing the guns realisable?
3. Methodological issues
This paper employed a qualitative research approach where a review of the literature was undertaken to answer the underlying questions of the paper. This approach allowed the collection of data from a local, regional and international perspective. This approach was employed to further broaden the understanding of the concept of silencing the guns in the framework of Africa’s socio-economic and political developmental challenges. Political instability and governance issues are factors that have been observed as barriers to Africa’s quest to silence the guns. The central aim of the paper was to look into the debates, arguments and theoretical literature informing this contemporary issue, especially considering the strides that the AU has taken in its effort to entice members towards consolidating good governance and political stability. Taking into account the pre-colonial, colonial and current narratives around development and governance in Africa, these narratives would therefore become integral to allowing the paper to reach a meaningful conclusion. Literature which spoke to the key questions of this paper was sourced from research databases such as Sabinet, Emerald Insight Journals, Google Scholar, IBSS, Scopus, and ScienceDirect. Undoubtedly, issues of governance and political instability have historical connotations attached to them it would therefore be important for the paper to examine these historical narratives and debates to understand how they have evolved to inform current debates around the concept of silencing the guns.

4. The concept of silencing the guns
The prevalence of lethal weapons has made it easier for individuals and groups to resort to and perpetuate violence, which has disrupted economic activities and destroyed infrastructure. This has deprived citizens of critical peace dividends such as employment, education, healthcare, roads, personal safety and decent livelihoods (Okumu et al., 2020). The concept of silencing the guns was born out of the observation that the African continent is the scene of numerous violent conflicts that make the desired economic and political integration of the continent difficult. Therefore, as part of the AU’s Agenda 2063, the AU sought to ensure that Africa is characterised by peace, political tolerance and good governance. The vision of silencing the guns was a vision earmarked for 2020. As part of its plans for operationalizing the vision, the AU convened a high-level retreat on the theme “Silencing guns in Africa: Building a roadmap to a conflict-free continent” (hereafter referred to as the Durban Retreat) (African Union, 2014). The retreat which was held in Durban, South Africa on the 28th and 29th of April 2014, sought to provide a forum for the chairperson of the AU, Dr Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma, to lead other eminent African personalities in a debate on how to develop and concretise a roadmap towards realising an Africa without war (African Union, 2014 & Musau, 2019). The above event was preceded by an open session of the AU PSC (Peace and Security Council) themed ‘Silencing the guns: Pre-requisites for realising a conflict-free Africa by the year 2020’, held at AU headquarters in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, on 24 April 2014. It was this event that laid the foundations for the formulation of “Silencing the guns, owning the future” (African Union, 2014). Ideas were exchanged on how to effectively address all the root causes of conflicts in Africa. Ideas covered a wide range of issues that the AU felt were major destabilising factors. These ranged from tackling the illicit proliferation of small arms and light weapons, and promoting reconciliation and social cohesion to preventing illicit resource outflows from Africa and strengthening security and defence institutions (African Union, 2014). In the years 2016–20 sub-Saharan Africa accounted for 26 per cent of total African arms imports, compared with 41 per cent in 2011–15. However, armed conflict in the Sahel coincided with increased arms imports by Burkina Faso (83 percent) and Mali (669 percent). At the centre of violence and conflict in Africa is the inability to stem the inflow of illegal weapons. According to Mules (2019) the illicit weapons trade in small arms has and continues to be the biggest factor driving conflict in the continent. It is estimated that 30 million firearms are being circulated through Africa. Therefore, if Africa wants to consolidate peace and development, it becomes imperative for the continent to address the issue of illicit trade in weapons.

The need to operationalise the idea of silencing the guns was driven by the observation that sustainable development, as envisaged in Agenda 2063, could not occur in a context of rampant
conflict, and thus required a firm, clear and coherent strategy, as well as a coordinated plan of implementation across multiple continental stakeholders (African Union, 2014 & Musau, 2019). This, in turn, means that member states need to, and must be, willing to sign, ratify and domesticate existing normative frameworks on peace, security and governance. However, I argue that in Africa, while there is unity when it comes to identifying factors contributing to the continent’s destabilisation, often such unity fades away when it comes to the ratification of frameworks that are aimed at addressing these factors. Reinforcing this view, Maluwa (2012) and the African Union (2014) revealed that it is undeniable that the success of the AU is largely dependent on its ability to self-fund the implementation of its programmes. Political will, where present, needs to be reinforced. For the concept of silencing the guns to move beyond 2020 and work towards the AU’s Agenda 2063 of ensuring peace and stability in the continent there is need for a collective consensus among members and the need for them to incorporate the vision of the AU for a peaceful Africa. Consolidating this view, the African Union (2014) reflected that the effectiveness of a supranational institution is highly dependent on the political will and commitment of its member states. For the AU to achieve success in silencing the guns beyond 2020 it must receive support from its member states.

5. Conceptualising governance and political issues in Africa

Conflict in Africa, whether sectarian or ethnic, has been observed from the confines of poor governance that leads to instability, and central to this is the concept of state fragility. The concept of state fragility identifies weak state legitimacy giving way to political instability and conflict that then increases the movement of weapons (weapons trafficking) which then fuels conflict (Adeto, 2019). For Cilliers (2013) a fragile state is one in which armed conflict and violence threaten the lives of the country’s citizens and prevents them from making a decent living. It is a state where inequality and exclusion are rife, with the majority of the population remaining poor, despite its having rich natural resources in many cases. It is also a country with very poor governance structures, where the state is often simply absent and does not provide basic services such as schools, hospitals and roads (Cilliers, 2013 & Adeto, 2019). All these factors are often present at the same time; an explosive cocktail of problems that trap countries in constant fragility. The concept has been applied to explain conflict patterns in Somalia, Sudan, and the Central African Republic. While state fragility gives way to instability, the concept, I argue, misses the mark by not taking into account the involvement of the external forces that also gives rise to this fragility. Exemplifying this, Kersten (2015) argued that Libya under dictatorship was socio-economically and by extension politically at peace, but the US-led NATO operation (in the name of protecting civilians), gave rise to the destabilisation of Libya, and therefore, the assumptions of the concept cannot be holistically applicable in understanding the political instability and governance issues in Africa because it neglects the analysis of external forces as contributors to state fragility. In essence, while the existence of fragile states in Africa is prevalent it is important to also comprehend the extent to which such fragility is driven by external forces.

For example, some EU companies are the biggest arms sellers to the Middle East and Africa, potentially contributing to the destabilisation of Africa (John, 2016 & Palet, 2018). However, solely associating the concept of state fragility with regard to political instability and governance issues in Africa presents a narrow view, because there are also other—often ignored—determinants, such as ethnic/religious and environmental factors, that need to be considered. For example, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) observes that Nigeria continues to experience a high number of internal and external periodic outbreaks of conflict due to the size of its population. There have been clashes between farmers and herders competing for land, and often these have proved fatal, with more than 3,600 people having been killed in such clashes since 2016 (Peace, 2017). In Ethiopia, Yusuf (2019) argues that the rise in violent ethnic conflict in recent years can largely be linked to the sharp increase in militant ethnic nationalism against a backdrop of state and party fragility. In March 2021 alone, clashes involving Ethiopia’s two largest ethnic groups killed more than 300 people over several days. Undoubtedly, the fragility of the political and governance systems in Africa contributes to the inability of the AU to guide the
continent towards development. Moreover, African states in the post-colonial era have rejected the idea of supranational institutions that they feel overrides their territorial sovereignty. The European Union argues that overcoming fragility is above all a moral imperative. One-third of the world’s poor live in fragile states (Giovannetti, 2009). Progress towards socio-economic development is lagging in these countries, and the cost of weak governance—especially when it leads to conflicts and wars—is enormous in economic, human and social terms. The African Development Bank notes that fragile countries are characterised by similar traits, namely, the inability to mobilise domestic resources, dependence on external resources, low levels of human development, low population density, weak soft and hard infrastructure, concentrated exports, high exposure to the risk of a breakout of armed conflict, divergent growth, a low life expectancy rate, foreign direct investment (FDI) flows only going to resource-rich countries, foreign reserves either scant or adequate, and external debt (African Union, 2014).

The African Development Bank classifies Burundi, the Central African Republic, Comoros, Congo, Cote d’Ivoire, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Djibouti, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Liberia, Sao Tome and Principe, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Sudan, South Sudan, Togo and Zimbabwe as fragile states (African Development Bank, 2016). Using the International Futures forecasting system (IFS), Cilliers (2013) revealed that ten countries are likely to remain in the “fragility trap” beyond 2050, namely Comoros, the Central African Republic (CAR), the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), the Republic of the Congo, Guinea-Bissau, Madagascar, Somalia, Sudan, South Sudan and Togo. While it is undeniable that African states are experiencing some political and governance deficiencies, this paper acknowledges that while continental treaties aimed at consolidating peace and security such as the convention for the elimination of mercenarism in Africa (1977), the African nuclear-weapon-free zone treaty (Pelindaba treaty 1996), the OAU convention on the prevention and combating of terrorism (1999), and the protocol relating to the establishment of the peace and security council of the African Union (2002) exist, their effective operation is often hindered by an array of issues such as weak borders, corruption, political instability, lack of political will, and nationalistic sentiments among states. Together, they have increased population displacement, increased the flow of weapons, resulted in millions of deaths and contributed considerably to destabilisation in many parts of Africa.

6. Current patterns of conflict in Africa

The above table reflects some of the current conflicts that have engulfed the continent. Together they have increased population displacement, increased the flow of weapons, resulted in millions of deaths and contributed considerably to destabilization in many parts of Africa. While peacekeeping missions led by the AU have contributed to a reduction in violence in some counties they have not addressed the root causes that give rise to these conflicts, and thus they remain a considerable challenge to governance and the rule of law in Africa. Therefore, while the concept of silencing the guns in Africa ought to be welcomed, the above issues that need to be taken into consideration and corrective action in terms of addressing them need to be agreed upon as a collective. For the AU a lot is at stake, as the inability to resolve political and governance-related issues in its own backyard costs doubt on the AU’s relevancy and effectiveness. Supporting this argument Leke (2017) contends that there is no shortage of ideas and opinions as to how Africa can create prosperity for the continent’s peoples, and there is huge potential. However, the fundamental challenge is the lack of implementation, driven by nationalistic consideration.

7. Silencing the guns beyond 2020: Political and governance challenges on colonialism and its continuing legacies

Any understanding of how Africa has become so fragile needs to consider the role played by colonialism. For Okumu et al. (2020) violent conflicts in Africa over borders (mainly internal), ethnicity, political stalemates, contestation of resources, extremist ideologies, etc., which are marked by their intensity, nature and geographic distribution are a direct result of colonialism.
| Country                      | Probable Causes                                                                 | Casualties                          | AU Intervention                                                                 |
|------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| The Democratic Republic of Congo (Intrastate) | Control over natural resources                                                   | 6 million as of 1996                | United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission                                 |
| Mozambique (Intrastate)       | Poverty, corruption and neglect                                                   | 2 500 (Since 2020) and 700,000 people internally displace | No official Mission, Support to the SADC                                          |
| Nigeria (Intrastate)          | Religious ideology/socio-economic                                                 | 36,000 (over a decade) and displaced two million in north-eastern Nigeria. | No official Mission, diplomat support to Nigeria, Cameroon and Chad               |
| Somalia (Intrastate)          | Competition for resources and power, repression.                                  | 4,000 civilians have been killed in al-Shabab attacks since 2010 | African Union Mission in Somalia                                                   |
| Sudan (Intrastate)            | Fragmented governance and competition for resources                               | 300,000 people dead and 2.5 million displaced | The African Union Mission in Sudan                                                |
| South Sudan (Intrastate)      | Political conflict, economic stagnation and drought                               | 380,000 (estimate)                  | The African Union Mission in Sudan                                                |
| Central African Republic (Intrastate) | Control of the diamond mines and absence of an effective state since colonial times | 3,000 to 6,000 (Un Estimate)        | Mission to the Central African Republic (MISCA)                                  |
| Cameroon                     | Marginalisation, fight for Independence                                           | 4,000                               | None                                                                            |
| Mali                         | Economic frustration, Political resentment                                        | 1500 to 3,524 since 2012            | African-led International Support Mission to Mali                                |

Source: Merchant (2020); Louw-Vaudran (2021); BBC News (2021); Maruf, 2020; Bangkok Post (2021) and Voice of America (2015)

Africa has never recovered from colonialism, let alone shaken off its shackles, rather, the continent inherited political and governance systems of colonialism in their holistic perspective. For Dersso (2014), despite their legal status, in functional terms, many African states (constructs of the continent’s encounter with colonial rule) came into being without possessing the requisite qualities of statehood. The author notes that apart from their alienation from the lived political and sociocultural experiences of the masses of the people, they become states without the capacity to provide for the security and other basic needs of their people. To date, and despite the passage of half a century since the end of colonial rule, a significant number of these countries still suffer from the lack of the functional attributes of a state. Adding to the above, Yakubu (2017) contended that the single most detrimental legacy of colonial domination remains the mashing up of various nationalities and ethnicities to make up contemporary nation-states. The implications of this have been the prevalence of ethnoreligious and sectarian conflicts which have become a common feature in a post-colonial Africa.

The legacies of colonialism are not only reflected in Africa’s conflicts, they are also observable in the politics and governance of Africa, which tend to give rise to these conflicts. As argued above, the rushed process of forming states in Africa after colonialism failed to reflect the need to remove colonial legacies from such formations. The colonial state in Africa was an authoritarian bureaucratic apparatus of control and not intended to be a school of democracy (Berman, 1998). This consolidates the view that during colonialism, there was no feature such as African popular participation in the political and governance structures. After colonialism, such political and governance processes were inherited by newly formed African states, processes that were autocratic and suppressed dissenting voices. Today in Africa, what we are observing is what African states inherited from their colonisers, their undemocratic and authoritarian rule. Since the
overarching goal of colonialism was to exploit the resources of Africa, it employed an undemocratic system of administration, which is something forcefully imposed from above (Merry, 2003). Today, looking at the rise to power by African elites acting in part with former colonisers, the governance systems in some African states is still reminiscent of those of colonialism, and post-colonial African leaders have failed to take into account neither the interests nor the realities of African people.

As a result, the disregard for the rule of law, totalitarianism and suppressing dissent are all factors which were inculcated in the minds of anti-colonial leaders of the time who later became leaders of the independent African states. Additionally, the colonial administrators and political elites made decisions on behalf of the indigenous population without taking into account their ideas or consulting them. Inheriting from this monopolised system, African political parties become a top-down organisational structure and therefore tend to be autocratic (Kura, 2008). Today, many African leaders are labelled as corrupt and unethical—issues that can be traced back to the colonial legacy where colonial powers produced the habit of corruption in the public service of contemporary Africa (Bayeh, 2015). Corruption is one of the most significant contributing factors to poverty, and poverty, in turn, leads to corruption, thereby creating a vicious cycle. Decades after its demise, many African countries have either failed, or found it difficult to break free from the shackles of colonialism, with its legacies continuing to inform politics and governance in Africa today. As a result, autocracy, corruption, election violence, ethnoreligious divisions and military coup d’état’s have become frequent occurrences since the demise of colonialism.

8. On the role of external actors in Africa’s fragility

African problems should not be viewed in isolation. Apart from colonialism, the role of external actors as contributing parties to the fragility of Africa needs to be examined. The African Union (2014) contended that in the contemporary global system there are not many national dynamics and challenges that are not influenced by external actors and events. Thus, although there are violent conflicts that occur in Africa, interested parties and stakeholders in these wars, more often than not, originate from beyond the continent. Rahaman et al. (2017) contended there are elements that prefer to see a struggling Africa for ideological, economical or politically strategic reasons. It is therefore against this backdrop that the concept of African solutions for African problems has grown within Africa’s political domains, justified by concerns about foreign meddling in the internal affairs of African countries. However, I argue that solving African issues the African way is impossible without addressing colonial legacies that continue to inform politics, economics and governance. In Africa today, many external actors have consolidated their presence for a variety of reasons, for example, Russian presence in the Central African Republic and the imminent construction of a naval base in Sudan, the presence of French troops in Mali under the pretext of counter-terrorism operations, and the presence of the US and Chinese bases in Djibouti in the name of Maritime security (Vine, 2020; Carmody, 2017). The presence of these actors contributes greatly to the indirect flow of weapons. Kondratenko (2020) noted that the Russians continue to be a major arms supplier in the African continent, controlling 37.6% of Africa’s arms market. Following far behind is the United States with 16%, France with 14%, and China with 9%. Apart from nation-states, multinational corporations have also contributed to political instability through their exploitative ways of doing business.

Africa’s lack of industrial development coupled with its abundance of natural resources has become a developmental curse for the continent. In Nigeria’s oil-rich Delta state, there has been a series of coordinated attacks on oil infrastructure by vigilante groups who accuse multinational corporations and the government of siphoning off the region’s oil and not contributing towards its development (Ibrahim & Bala, 2018). Africa was cheated out of US$11 billion in 2010 through just one of the tricks used by multinational companies to reduce tax bills, according to an Oxfam report (Uluogu, 2015). Multinational corporations have often worked hand in hand with corrupt politicians to siphon off Africa’s resources. According to Oxfam (2015), Africa is haemorrhaging billions of dollars because multinational companies are cheating African governments out of vital revenues.
by not paying their fair share in taxes. In Nigeria, Shell oil company colluded with Nigeria’s corrupt Abacha regime to steal oil, polluted the country’s rivers, wells, creeks and soil and render millions of farmers and fishermen in the Niger Delta jobless (Adusei, 2009). In the DRC, Vircoulon (2011) reported that various rebel groups financed their activities by pillaging the country’s natural resources in response to what they see as exploitation by multinational cooperations. Additionally, many states in Africa engulfed by violence have made use of private military contractors, often to assist legitimate forces to restore order and stability. The growth of private military contractors (PMCs) raises ethical questions surrounding the commercialisation of war (Sullivan, 2018). Apart from the above, Western affiliated financial institutions have also contributed to conflict and political instability in Africa through their structural adjustment programmes. Through foreign aid, international financial institutions (The World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the U.S. Agency for International Development), through the use of structural adjustment and economic stabilisation programmes took the lead in demanding policy changes, such as currency devaluation, removal of subsidies for public services, privatisation of parastatal bodies, and reduction in the size and cost of the public sector (Adekanye, 1995; Thomson et al., 2017). Apart from structural adjustment programmes, these institutions soon began to show interest in promoting policy changes through aid. Assistance to Africa became tied to the condition that political reforms are undertaken, a condition that is now attached, at least rhetorically, to almost all Western aid (National Research Council, 1992). Actual donor practices varied: the United States demanded good governance, France argued for greater liberty and democracy, and Britain pushed for respect for human rights (National Research Council, 1992). Today, these actions have not changed, rather they have become requirements for African states who seek financial assistance from Western affiliated financial institutions.

9. On fragmented governance in a post-colonial era

The above deliberation reflected that many of Africa’s political problems today are direct results of colonialism and the role played by external actors. More so, they reflect that post-colonial African leaders have failed to remove the shackles of colonialism that continue to influence Africa’s socio-economic and political direction. In many Africa states the media is restricted; it cannot operate freely and report on issues of national and public interest. Media houses that report on what leaders deem as threats to their hold on power are either shut down or their journalists are jailed without trial (Kode, 2018). Such cases have been witnessed in Egypt, Zimbabwe, Rwanda and Uganda. African leaders have become obsessed with power to such an extent that they have altered their constitutions to extend their terms in office. Often such action breeds conflict and violence that results in civilian casualties, as observed in Uganda, Burkina Faso, Equatorial Guinea, Côte d’Ivoire, and Tunisia (Posner & Young, 2007). Corruption has become entrenched in the public service, often without any form of accountability or transparency. Hope (2000) argues that the corruption problem in Africa reflects the more general, and now legendary, climate of unethical leadership and bad governance found throughout most of the continent. In Africa, many countries operate semi-democracies characterised by the suppression of voices which oppose the status quo. Countries such as Rwanda, Zambia, Zimbabwe and Egypt operate as democracies but oppose voices that advocate for a different status quo. Elections are marred by violence and accusations of vote-rigging, and opposition figures are harassed and sometimes even jailed (Omototola, 2010).

For Essoungou (2010) in some countries (Kenya, Ghana) where independence was hard-won, nationalist parties and leaders soon established dominant structures that wielded exclusive rights to govern. Authorities who inherited power from their former colonial rulers also soon suppressed competing organisations and voices (evident in Gabon and Cameroon). Immediately after independence, as discontent grew with regimes unable to lift people’s living standards, military dictatorships came to the fore. In 1963 alone three governments fell to coup d’état’s, in Togo, Dahomey (later renamed Benin) and Congo-Brazzaville. By 1975 approximately half the countries on the continent were led by military or civilian-military governments (Essoungou, 2010). Today, governance systems in many African states have become fragmented and have
gone on to represent political elites acting under the cohort of former colonisers. The lack of popular checks on leaders’ decisions contributed to abuses of power by individuals and institutions, oppressive despotic regimes, the violation of human rights and widespread corruption (Essoungou, 2010). With civil liberties curtailed and their discontent being met with suppression, civil conflicts and uprisings erupted and continue to do so even today. Even though many countries have allowed citizens to participate in the political processes, Essoungou (2010) argues that their real influence over these institutions is often limited. Access to justice is frequently expensive for the majority, and police and armed forces are sometimes the worst human rights abusers. The greatest threats to good governance today come from corruption, violence and poverty, all of which undermine transparency, security, participation and fundamental freedoms.

10. On religious and ethnic intolerance

Today, conflicts in Sudan, Ethiopia, the Central African Republic, Mali and northern Nigeria are laden with religious and ethnic intolerance. Crocker (2019) contends that the challenge facing Africa’s leaders—perhaps above all others—is how to govern under conditions of ethnic diversity. Poor leadership can result in acts of commission or omission that alienate or disenfranchise geographically distinct communities (Essoungou, 2010 & Crocker, 2019). African countries today face greater challenges to peace and stability than ever before. The countries of sub-Saharan Africa, including Sierra-Leone, Ivory Coast, Liberia and the DRC, are a volatile mix of insecurity, instability, corrupt political institutions and poverty (Irobi, 2005). Alarmingly, most of these countries lack the political will to maintain previous peace agreements and thus have fallen prey to continuous armed ethnic conflict. (Marshall & Gurr, 2003). This is partly due to ineffective conflict management. The conflicts in these countries are mostly between ethnic groups, not between states. If not checked, ethnic conflicts are contagious and can spread quickly across borders like cancer cells. The competition for scarce resources is a common factor in almost all religious and ethnic conflicts in Africa. For Irobi (2005), however, ethnic conflict is a sign of a weak state or a state embroiled in ancient loyalties. In this case, states act with a bias in favour of a particular ethnic group or region, and behaviours such as preferential treatment fuel ethnic conflicts. Therefore, in critical or difficult political situations, the effectiveness of governance is dependent on the ability to address social issues and human needs. Irobi (2005) concludes that governance in Africa is threatened not by ethnicity per se, but by the failure of national institutions to recognise and accommodate ethnic differences and interests.

Apart from the above, I argue that there are other often ignored factors that in the future are going to be at the centre of political instability in Africa. These range from porous borders, climate change, conflict, increasing competition for water resources, increasing demand for grazing and farming land, population increases resulting in more demand for food, the consolidation of cross-border crime syndicates, irregular migration, the competition of natural resources, proxy wars and the inability of African leaders to deliver socio-economic and political development. However, this is not to say that the AU has not undertaken initiatives to promote peace and stability in Africa. For example, there have been a number of peacekeeping operations that have been led by the AU.

11. Peacekeeping operations as a response to conflict and violence: an AU perspective

Critics of the African Union contend that that it lacks the operational capacity to resolve the many conflicts that have engulfed the continent. Without international assistance, many conflicts in Africa will be beyond the reach of AU-led peacekeeping initiatives. While acknowledging that the AU is limited in its peacekeeping initiatives, this paper argues that the AU is a continental body that does not operate in isolation, and therefore that the perceived inability of the AU to address conflicts in the continent reflects a failure of African countries. There have been documented efforts by AU peacekeeping missions to address conflicts but these have received mixed reactions in the continent concerning their success. Peacekeeping mandates, according to the UN, include: disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration of ex-combatants; human rights protection and
promotion; electoral assistance; landmine removal and associated activities; rule-of-law related activities; and promotion of social and economic recovery and development (Renwick, 2015).

12. The African Union Mission in Somalia

Violence and conflict in Somalia driven by al-Shabaab gave rise to the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) in March 2007 with an estimated force of 20,600. The African lead mission was aimed at assisting the Federal Government of Somalia’s in its battle against Al-Shabaab (Williams, 2013a). The socio-economic destruction of Somalia as a result of the conflict is impossible for one to ignore, with more than 4,000 civilians having been killed in al-Shabaab attacks since 2010. The figure encompasses deaths from shooting attacks, abductions, suicide bombings, and other incidents in which civilians were “determined to be the direct, primary target” (Maruf, 2020). Medina, the biggest hospital in Mogadishu, has recorded more than 54,000 injuries from gun- and bomb-based attacks since 2007, of which 75 percent are civilians (Maruf, 2020). While the effectiveness of African-led peacekeeping missions has been questioned, Williams (2018) argued that AMISOM contributed considerably towards the decline in conflicts in Somalia and that this has contributed to stability in the East Africa region. AMISOM was able to gain humanitarian access and provided various forms of relief to significant numbers of Somalis (Williams, 2013a). However apart from the above, the mission was confronted with a number of challenges. It failed to defeat al-Shabaab because it could not function as a unit due to the differences between its troop-contributing countries, and it struggled to carry out the crucial non-military aspects of stabilisation (Williams, 2013a). Secondly, the mission could not mediate between Somali political elites to ensure common understanding and to implement a workable national security architecture focused on defeating al-Shabaab. Even though the mission is still active in Somalia, the inability to defeat al-Shabaab coupled with the difficulty in finding consensus among Somali elite’s means that the mission will find it difficult to assist Somalia in building local security forces effective enough to allow it to withdraw. Düsterhöft and Gerlach (2013) contended that that without AMISOM the country would have disintegrated due to the inability of security forces to respond to the complexity and sophistication of al-Shabaab attacks.

13. The African Union Mission in Sudan (AMIS)

In 2003, the Sudan Liberation Army (SLA) and the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM), waged war against the government of Sudan. They attacked towns, government facilities and civilians in Darfur. Policemen were killed and more the eight police stations were destroyed (Adamu, 2008). These attacks, coupled with a weak army and a fragmented political structure, increased the security vulnerability of Sudan, and contributed to population displacement and an increase in the flow of refugees (nearly 43,000 Sudanese refugees are hosted by non-neighbouring countries). Since the conflict began in 2003, The UN and human rights groups estimate that approximately 300,000 people were killed in the conflict, and since 2011, violence has displaced and severely affected more than 900,000 people in the South Kordofan border region (Biron, 2012). In response, the AU deployed the African Union Mission in Sudan (AMIS) to monitor the ceasefire agreed earlier in 2004. The mission had to assist in the process of “confidence building” and to “contribute to a secure environment”. However, Chin and Morgenstien (2005) argue that the mission did not create a stable environment for the people of Darfur. There were many challenges impeding the effectiveness of AMIS. The mission did not have sufficient weaponry or resources to carry out its job of monitoring a ceasefire that was widely and regularly violated by all sides. It was characterised by a weak mandate, and fewer than 5000 troops who were expected to monitor an area the size of Texas. Donor governments failed to adequately support the mission (Chin & Morgenstien, 2005). In support of the above, the International Crisis Group (2005) communicated that although AMIS had a positive impact in some areas by often going beyond the strict terms of its mandate, its ability to protect civilians and humanitarian operations was hamstrung by limited capacity, insufficient resources and political constraints. The AMIS ended in 2007 when it was replaced by the African Union-United Nations Hybrid Operation in Darfur (UNAMID). This paper argues that now that both the AMIS and UNAMID have ceased their operations in Sudan, they have
left a void as they have not addressed the root factors that were driving the conflict, and as a result Sudan is still plagued by periodic outbreaks of violence.

14. The African Mission in Burundi (AMIB)

The Burundian civil war decimated all aspects of life in the country. Over the course of the entire civil war (1994–2005), it is estimated that 150,000 civilians died (World Peace Foundation, 2015). The war was driven by the ethnic divisions between the Hutu and the Tutsi ethnic groups. The Africa Union mission to Burundi (AIMB), with an estimated 3335 troops was the first AU-mandated armed peace operation. The mission was driven by the need to intervene in African conflicts in cases where the UN was either not interested or delayed in responding to a volatile security situation in which there was no comprehensive peace agreement (Badmus, 2015). The AIMB was mandated to facilitate the implementation of the ceasefire agreement and to ensure that the defence and security situation in Burundi was stabilised. The mission helped deter further political violence, with 95 percent of the country being regarded as stable after the departure of the AIMB. The mission helped oversee the implementation of the ceasefire agreement and facilitated the National Council for the Defense of Democracy—Forces for the Defense of Democracy’s (CNDD-FDD) participation in the process (Badmus, 2015). If not for the AMIB, Burundi would have descended into chaos, which would have prolonged the security threat in the region (Badmus, 2015). However, like other missions, the AMIB was not without challenges. One of the challenges was the lack of funding which resulted in the AU relying heavily on external donors. Additionally, the issues of logical support and infrastructure provision were also seen as challenges.

15. The AU Mission for Support to the Elections in the Comoros (AMISEC)

In 2006, the AU mandated a larger AU Mission for support to the Elections in Comoros, or AMISEC, which consisted of 462 military and police observers (Williams, 2013a). In the past, Comoros had had its fair share of challenges. In 1995, democratically elected President Djohar was overthrown in a military coup. President Massounde was overthrown in yet another (bloodless) military coup in the night of April 29th, 1999 (World Peace Foundation, 2017). The objectives of the AU intervention through Operation Democracy in Comoros were to restore the authority of the central government, organise and provide security for Anjouanese elections, supervise the disarmament and reintegration into the National Army of Anjouanese armed forces, and to assist with the establishment of an internal security force (World Peace Foundation, 2017). Tanzania and Sudan contributed troops, Senegal, military and tactical advice, Libya and France, logistics and funding, and the EU with funding. The mission had no casualties and troops were quickly withdrawn once the goal of the mission was achieved. Since Operation Democracy, the Comoros has remained reasonably stable, holding several rounds of successful elections, though with some minor fights between factions and property destruction.

In 2015, there were nine UN peacekeeping missions in Africa supported by more than eighty thousand troops (80 percent of all UN peacekeepers are deployed in Africa) and fifteen thousand civilians. The largest Missions were in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Darfur (jointly administered with the AU), South Sudan, and Mali (Renwick, 2015). However, there are many problems with peacekeeping missions in Africa and if not addressed, they have the potential to impede the effectiveness of peacekeeping missions. Firstly, African governments have complained about having little say in the design and mandating of UN operations on the continent, arguing that it does not take into consideration their potential input. Secondly, leaders in Africa and within the UN have called for African forces to play a larger role in securing peace and stability on the continent, but budget constraints persist (Renwick, 2015). African states struggle to pay their membership dues to the African Union and as a result, whenever the AU deploys a peacekeeping mission, it always needs to find external assistance, which means that without external assistance, AU-led peacekeeping missions in Africa will not even take off, let alone succeed. Renwick (2015) contended that peacekeeping operations are unfair in their design and execution. For example, rich nations contribute more to the UN budget for peacekeeping, but send very few troops, leaving poorer countries to contribute the bulk of the troops. Peacekeeping missions in Africa have always drawn a mixed response. Missions that were undertaken nearly
A decade ago in West Africa in cooperation with ECOWAS in Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Ivory Coast are widely hailed as successes, whereas current missions to CAR, DRC, Mali, South Sudan, and Darfur, have not improved stability (Renwick, 2015). These missions have failed largely because they were deployed in a context of ongoing war where the belligerents themselves did not want to stop fighting or preying on civilians. Despite the importance of peacekeeping, peacekeepers have come under criticism for human rights violations, sexual assault and the inability to respond on time. In the Central African Republic, the United Nations multidimensional integrated stabilisation mission has been accused of human rights abuses and violations (Bruce, 2016). In DRC, Mali and Sudan, there have been reports of civilians being sexually abused by peacekeepers and the lack of conviction of those found guilty has given rise to the notion that peacekeepers are a law unto themselves. Renwick (2015) concludes that for peacekeeping operations to be successful, they need to have an effective political strategy, clear goals and expectations, and well trained personnel, and be well funded. Additionally, successful peacekeeping missions’ use of diplomatic tools, such as mediation, negotiation, peace enforcement (which can include Security Council-backed military action), and peacebuilding, defined as “strengthening national capacities” for conflict management, might reduce reliance on force by peacekeepers.

16. The Limitation of the AU as a conflict mediator

17.1. Funding and logistical and technical capacity
While, on paper, peacekeeping missions may be led by the AU, the majority of funding and logistical and technical support has always been from donors. That means that the AU does not have adequate financial capacity to holistically fund peacekeeping operations within the continent. While is not a problem to enlist the support of donors, it leaves little room for Africa to have a say in the formulation of peacekeeping operations, let alone their eventual implementation. This also reflects the fact that without donors it will be difficult for the AU to individually finance peacekeeping missions. Arndt et al. (2016) note that many countries in Africa are poor and lack the resources needed to effectively ensure the provision of logistical and technical support, elements that are important in ensuring effective peacekeeping.

17.2. Complexity of the conflicts and their root cause
Responding to conflicts requires a detailed understanding of their nature, type, complexity and strength. Conflicts in Africa are driven by a combination of factors that cannot be addressed with similar solutions in each case. Ethnic conflicts, conflicts over resources, conflicts driven by a breakdown in governance, and conflicts driven by terrorism require different solutions and approaches, hence the need to understand these differences before peacekeeping missions can be drawn up. However, one of the biggest problems with peacekeeping missions is that they do not address the root causes of conflict (Genugten, 2008), for example, knowing that issues such as poverty, inequality, and marginalisation feed into conflicts. Without addressing these issues, it becomes difficult to understand how peacekeeping missions can be successful. In the short term they might reduce the violence, but in the long term, without an effective framework to address root causes, conflicts are likely to arise again.

17.3. The question of sovereignty
African states are afraid of supranational institutions that might override their sovereignty. Effective peacekeeping requires consent from the host state, and this presents a complex situation of state sovereignty versus human security (Latif & Khan, 2010). Many factors determine the nature as well as the level of requirement of host state consent, such as the type of conflict, the timing of interventions, the interests of world powers, domestic and external actors, and the nature of threats and challenges. This raises the critical question of how peacekeeping and humanitarian interventions are defined. With regards to sovereignty, Africa countries are very skeptical about foreign intervention and have become very protective of their sovereignty. As a result, this limits the AU’s ability to direct peacekeeping missions. More worryingly, however, is the observation that in some cases it is only after pressure from world powers or the United
Nations Security Council that African countries agree for peacekeepers to be deployed in their countries. African countries often deny the extent of a conflict until it threatens the state itself. It is very important therefore for sovereignty not to interfere in the quest to consolidate and promote stability in the continent.

17. Achievements and future possibility of silencing the guns beyond 2020

As argued earlier, while the concept of silencing the guns in Africa ought to be welcomed, there are considerable challenges to be addressed in the quest to ensure its realisation beyond 2020. While the concept has been at times labelled over ambitious considering its timeline, Karssen (2020), highlights some of the achievements that can be attributed to the concept of silencing the guns. Firstly, Sudan’s transitional government, in January 2020, signed a preliminary peace deal with one of two main rebel groups operating in the Blue Nile and South Kordofan regions. This was soon followed by similar agreements in the Central African Republic when the country and rebels agreed to a peace deal in February 2019, and in Sudan the same took place in September 2018 (Karssen, 2020). In the Horn of Africa, Ethiopia and Eritrea also signed a landmark peace accord ushering in a new phase of normalised relations between the two states and ending two decades of a “frozen” border conflict. For the author, these peace accords are a testament to growing levels of cooperation between the AU and its global partners. For example, the South Sudan deal was mediated through a collective and joint effort by the AU, the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), the UN, the European Union (EU), China, the United States, the United Kingdom, and Norway (Karssen, 2020). Moreover, to enhance inter-agency cooperation, in April 2017 the AU and the UN signed the Joint UN-AU Framework for Enhanced Partnership in Peace and Security. This joint venture was anchored in improving cooperation between the two bodies concerning conflict prevention and management as well as peace operations and peace-building efforts. Other considerable achievements have been partnerships for peace in Africa through AU diplomacy, improved continental response frameworks, progress in specific conflict cases and improved efforts to curb the spread of Small Arms and Light Weapons (Okumu et al., 2020).

However, the author also acknowledges that these achievements are a drop in the ocean compared to the socio-economic and political upheavals facing Africa. I argue that while joint frameworks and peace deals are positive signs, it will take more than that to address the political and governance upheaval facing Africa. For example, the issues of funding within the AU need to be addressed. As the demands placed upon the AU continue to multiply, sourcing sufficient funds and manpower is an enduring challenge. The AU itself remains perpetually underfunded and is dependent on external donors, including the UN and EU, to make up shortfalls; in 2018, external partners accounted for some 40 percent of the AU’s disclosed USD 515 million annual budget (Karssen, 2020). AU member states have consistently fallen short on their financial commitments and the implications for African peace and security are profound, where the dependency on unpredictable external sources of financing has repeatedly jeopardised the AU’s ability to sustain its operations and also opens the way for their interference in African affairs (Karssen, 2020). Going forward, the African Union (2014) argued that perhaps the biggest problem facing the concept of silencing the guns is to reduce the number of guns present in the first place. Adeniyi (2017) reflects that the concentration of most of Africa’s estimated 100 million uncontrolled small arms and light weapons (SALWs) in crisis zones and other security-challenged environments often exacerbates and prolongs conflicts. Addressing this, however, will need investment in good governance and the rule of law. While transnational trafficking networks and porous borders will no doubt remain the focus of regional law enforcement authorities countering the proliferation in illicit weapons (Karssen, 2020), the reluctance of many AU member states to abide by broader arms control norms signals a deficit in political will, without which a cohesive cross-continental effort to stem the flow of arms cannot be mounted.
18. Concluding remarks and policy implications

Even though the concept of silencing the guns was earmarked for 2020, African politicians agree that there is a need to make this a lifelong goal anchored in the need for peace in the continent. Karssen (2020) reflected that according to data from the Uppsala Conflict Data Program, in 2018 there were 21 active civil wars on the continent—the highest number recorded in Africa since 1946. Moreover, these conflicts have become ever more complex, expanding across multiple national borders and drawing in a wide array of local, regional, and international actors—including transnational Islamist militant organisations. These conflicts are characterised by an array of factors, from external interference to the inability of African leaders to secure socio-economic development, which then breeds conflicts and violence. The conflicts over the control of resources have also compounded Africa’s development and increased the resource exploitation by multinationals corporations. The role of external actors in Africa’s political and governance instability cannot be left unchecked. Karssen (2020) argued that even though some African states have signed the landmark 2014 Arms Trade Treaty (ATT) which seeks to prevent arms exporters from supplying weapons to war crime perpetrators and human rights violators, other African states have not. Therefore, this paper has revealed that while the concept of silencing the guns was noble in its aim, there are, were and still are challenges to its eventual realisation that it failed to take into consideration. Hence I argue that, going forward, the concept should be ingrained in Africa’s developmental goals, and rather than have a set timeline, it should persist until Africa is truly peaceful and stable. However, I conclude that without addressing the challenges above and forging unity in the continent, a peaceful and stable Africa will remain a pipedream.

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