

4 October 2013

# Challenges and Prospects for Democratic Governance in Southern Africa

Can Southern Africa translate its relative stability and security into more democratic institutions? It's possible, say Jakkie Cilliers and Dimpho Motsamai, but old problems stand in the way. They include poverty and inequality, the mixed legacy of liberation-era politics, and a weak commitment to regional unity.

By Dimpho Motsamai and Jakkie Cilliers for ISN

The last five years have seen intensified debate on the political and socio-economic trajectories of the members of the Southern African Development Community (SADC). This debate reflects the reality that Southern Africa consists of a collection of very different countries whose futures remain uncertain. On the one hand, the region includes Swaziland, one of the world's last absolute monarchies, with one of the highest rates of HIV/AIDS in the world. It also includes the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), a country that is at constant war with neighbors that frequently occupy its territory. On the other hand, the region is dominated by South Africa, which has a thriving economy, is a member of the BRICS group and the G20 global economies, and sets global standards in reconciliation and democratic advancement. The region also includes Angola, whose economy is booming as it competes with Nigeria to be Africa's largest oil producer. As a whole, Southern Africa is generally less violent and unstable than any other region on the African continent, and its members generally speak with one voice regionally and internationally. For all its external solidarity, however, the region's complex mosaic of countries faces key challenges in the next few years that will shape its long-term development trajectory, and could even threaten the viability of the SADC.

## From Liberation to...?

The first of these challenges is the incomplete transition from liberation-era leadership to more open democratic governance. Southern Africa is the most recently liberated region in Africa and continues to suffer the associated authoritarian hangover. Democracy has been slow to come to some countries and, as the liberation-era leaders age, young people are increasingly demanding change. The median age of SADC countries, for instance, varies from 33 years in Mauritius to 16 years in Zambia and Angola. The region also includes countries with high population growth rates (reaching 3% in Malawi) and large youth bulges. In all SADC countries other than Mauritius and South Africa, more than 50% of the population is between 15 and 29 years of age – a potential supply of labor and innovation, or of social turmoil and unrest if economic opportunities are scarce.

On the whole, the continuity of authoritarian political practices in some countries stands in sharp contrast to the trend of expanding pluralism, exemplified by peaceful transitions in Zambia and Malawi. While liberation-era parties remain in power in many other countries, leadership changes have demonstrated the importance of generational pressures and intra-party democracy. These trends signal the growing acceptance of pluralism in contexts where there were very low initial expectations for competitive politics and where the constraints of ethnic diversity, regional differentiation, and economic inequalities persist.

### **Poverty and Inequality**

The second key challenge facing the region is socio-economic. In Madagascar and the DRC, more than three quarters of the population live on less than \$1.25 per day – that is, in abject and unrelenting poverty. In Malawi, Tanzania, Zimbabwe, Zambia and Mozambique, more than half of the population lives in these conditions. Even Botswana, often regarded as a poster child for development success, has almost 20% of its population living in absolute poverty.

Southern Africa is also one of the most unequal regions on the planet. Namibia, Lesotho, Botswana, South Africa, Zimbabwe and Angola are all among the top 12 most unequal countries, as measured by Gini coefficient. In South Africa, the region's economic giant, inequality and the legacy of apartheid have resulted in high levels of violent crime and increased levels of violent protest, which are increasing ahead of elections in 2014. This toxic mixture of poverty, inequality and large youthful populations has been mitigated in recent years by reductions in the impact of HIV/AIDS, efforts to reduce deep poverty through social grants (particularly in Namibia and South Africa), and the impact of resource booms in countries such as Angola and Mozambique.

### **More Regionalism?**

A third factor is the weakness of regionalism and the lack of progress toward further integration either within the Southern African Customs Union (SACU) or SADC. The current revenue-sharing formula in SACU results in a substantial cash transfer from South Africa to Botswana, Lesotho, Swaziland and Namibia. As a result, efforts made by South Africa since 2011 to make SACU revenues more useful for trade integration and industrialization have been resisted by these countries. For its part, South Africa argues that for SACU to be an effective instrument of trade facilitation and integration, SACU revenues must be used to develop regional infrastructure, through financial contributions from member-states. This, however, requires SACU member-states to first identify common regional and global interests, which have remained elusive.

Another obstacle to deeper regionalism is the fear that a customs union at the level of the SADC will reduce government revenue for SACU members and supplant SACU revenue arrangements. And indeed, opening up to SADC could have a negative short-term impact on smaller undiversified economies in SACU. More broadly, progress within SADC is constrained by the lack of complementarity between the region's economies and the vast gulf in per capita income. Income levels between countries like Botswana, Mauritius and South Africa on the one hand and Zimbabwe and the DRC on the other differ by a factor of more than 30, making simultaneous economic integration and progress on the free movement of goods and people extremely difficult.

### **Trouble ahead for democracy in SADC?**

Following its restructure in 2001, SADC has also been unable to contribute to the democratic processes of its member states and is viewed as weak and ineffectual. This was reflected most prominently by the suspension of the SADC Tribunal after it ruled against land seizure in Zimbabwe. As a result, national sovereignty now prevails in the region. Member-states do not trust the regional

organization to provide anything more than basic secretariat functions and often fail to abide by agreements, despite having collaborated in crafting them. Frustration about SADC's lack of transparency is also widespread, despite the best efforts of its officials who are effectively hamstrung by the member-states.

As an effective and forward-looking regional organization, SADC therefore continues to disappoint. Its members are disparate and their commitment to the stated goal of regional integration is often limited to external political solidarity. Rather than looking forward to an integrated, democratic and prosperous region characterized by good governance, transparency and vibrant politics, its member states prefer to look backward, at their shared history of political emancipation, focusing on national sovereignty and regime security rather than human security. Although this situation reflects the poverty, limited capacity and challenges of the region, the lack of vision and leadership should also be a cause for self-reflection.

Ultimately, Southern Africa remains a region in transition. Though elections are now widely accepted as the source of political legitimacy, the region is in the process of democratic consolidation, with the notable exceptions of Swaziland, Madagascar and the DRC. Incremental progress is being made to erect participatory institutions with checks and balances, but progress is uneven. Many of the region's states will continue to struggle with the teething problems that are typical of transitional democracies: weak political parties and parliaments, strong executives, and weak public engagement in politics. Meanwhile, demands are on the rise for new forms of governance and new thinking about the appropriate way to ensure future development and security in a rapidly changing external environment.

---

Dimpho Motsamai is a researcher in the Africa Conflict Prevention Program (ACPP) at ISS Africa.

Jakkie Cilliers is the Executive Director of the Institute for Security Studies.

---

## **Publisher**

[International Relations and Security Network \(ISN\)](#)

---

Creative Commons - Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 Unported

---

<http://www.isn.ethz.ch/Digital-Library/Articles/Detail/?ots591=4888caa0-b3db-1461-98b9-e20e7b9c13d4&lng=en&id=170048>

---

ISN, Center for Security Studies (CSS), ETH Zurich, Switzerland