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No end in sight for the dark continent's suffering

HENRY ERGAS THE AUSTRALIAN APRIL 06, 2015 12:00AM



Illustration: Eric Lobbecke Source: Supplied

Thursday's murder by Somali terrorists of 150 mainly Christian students at Kenya's Garissa University College provided a horrific backdrop to the Easter weekend. And with more than 200 young Christian girls kidnapped in Nigeria by Boko Haram still in captivity, the spotlight is once again on Africa and on the continent's struggle to find peace and prosperity.

That struggle is all the harsher because it is in Africa that Islam and Christianity collide. There are twice as many Christians as Muslims in Africa south of the Sahara; indeed, in Nigeria alone, more Anglicans will have attended church services on Easter Sunday than in Britain, Canada, the US and Australia combined. But according to projections released last week by the Pew Research Centre, Islam's share of the region's population will rise from around 30 per cent today to 35 per cent in 2050.

If that change causes acute tensions it is partly because of the region's broader problems. The most immediate is a population explosion which has seen sub-Saharan Africa's population increase from barely 200 million in 1950 to just under a billion today.

And a further doubling is expected over the period to 2050, lifting the region's share of the world's population from 12 per cent in 2010 to 20 per cent in 2050.

The result has been to destroy the historical pattern in which Africa south of the Sahara had sparse population and abundant land. Faced with the suddenness and speed of population

growth, farmers long reliant on techniques that made extensive use of land have come under enormous pressure, accentuating social conflict and fuelling mass migration to cities.

As the numbers living in major metropolises leapt from less than 10 million in 1980 to more than 50 million today, groups that previously lived apart have been thrown together in decaying cities where resources are scarce and lawlessness pervasive.

Forced into the informal economy at best, or the “second economy” of petty theft and street gangs at worst, migrants’ survival has come to depend on ethnic solidarities, with technologies such as mobile phones helping to forge and maintain communal ties. State structures have done nothing to ease the resulting pathologies, which range from crippling hardship through to tragedies such as Ebola epidemics and periodic waves of witch-hunting. Rather, with very few exceptions, the African state remains almost entirely dysfunctional, aggravating every crisis the region faces.

It would be a mistake, however, to view African states as weak. On the contrary, as the eminent American scholar Jeffrey Herbst showed some years ago, the salient feature of sub-Saharan Africa is that national borders, which were largely set by the Berlin Conference of 1884-85, have remained beyond challenge.

Unlike Europe, where a Darwinian process of fragmentation and consolidation eliminated poorly performing states, that stability has allowed states which command little more than their capital city to survive intact. Although some countries, such as the Congo, Somalia and Sierra Leone, eventually collapsed, predatory governments have rarely been exposed to any external threat, freeing them to focus on extracting rents that could serve to consolidate their power base.

And those power bases have proven remarkably resilient. A few hundred people in each country, the Africanist Nicolas van de Walle finds, typically rotate between the major government offices, with “removal from one office usually leading to appointment to another”. In the highly centralised, presidential, regimes which prevail in much of the region, those elites accumulate enormous resources, invariably by illegal means.

Periodic efforts by aid donors to impose reform have done little to improve the picture. Rather, van de Walle argues, governing elites have learnt to accommodate those efforts, protecting their positions while cutting spending in areas such as infrastructure, education and health care.

The vacuum has been filled by Non-Governmental Organisations, but the NGOs are themselves heavily dependent on (and vulnerable to capture by) the administrations whose shortcomings they claim to address. With the aid business becoming the region’s largest employer, “the evidence”, van de Walle concludes, “suggests levels of corruption in donor-funded NGOs that certainly rivals corruption within the state”.

Nor has democratisation helped. In Africa’s “illiberal democracies”, the Paris-based Africa specialist Clement Boursin estimates, incumbents win more than 95 per cent of multiparty elections. But what has changed is how power is secured.

Previously, “leaders sought to build broad elite coalitions, involving all the country’s

ethnoregional groups". Now, they focus on mobilising "minimally winning coalitions that provide an electoral majority but make no claim to inclusiveness". Highlighting ethnic divisions has therefore become the key to electoral success.

It is in that poisonous atmosphere that religious conflicts play themselves out. No doubt, the visibility of Christian proselytism, mainly associated with Charismatic and Pentecostal groups, plays a role. But Latin America (where Evangelical Protestants now account for some 10 per cent of the population) shows that even in the midst of extreme poverty, very large shifts in the religious mix need not give rise to social tensions.

Rather, Africa's drama is that Islam, as Samuel Huntington remarked, "has bloody borders". And the threat Islamic fundamentalism poses is made all the greater by the fact that the region's traditional, syncretic forms of Islam, which long coexisted with Africa's other faiths, are being replaced by versions which are self-consciously purer and more extreme.

The chaos of urban centres where hordes of young people roam the streets, both daily victims and perpetrators of violence, then offers as fertile a staging ground for terrorism as one might imagine.

"Suffering", wrote John Iliffe in *Africans: the History of a Continent*, "has been a central part of the African experience", which ordinary Africans have "faced squarely, valuing endurance and courage above all other virtues".

As the Easter week, with its message of redemption, draws to a close, Africa's suffering remains as far from its end as it has ever been.

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