

AFRICA TRENDSPOTTER

Issue 4 • April 2020

CONFLICT HOTSPOT

JIHADIS STEAL A MARCH

There has been speculation that militant Islamist groups on the continent would take advantage of the current chaos caused by the Covid-19 pandemic to carry out operations.

Data from March media reports seems to corroborate this notion – with conflict related fatalities on the continent increasing 39% compared to February and 37% year-on-year. Data for the first few weeks of April suggest the trend has continued.

Mali, which held the first round of its parliamentary elections on March 29 and the runoff on April 19, was particularly volatile over the first quarter.

The first round saw attacks and intimidation, with opposition leader, Soumaila Cisse, kidnapped in the week running up to polls. Cisse is the first high-level politician kidnapped in Mali and has yet to be returned.

The main group wreaking havoc in Mali has been the Group for the Support of Muslims and Islam (JNIM) – an Al-Qaeda affiliate that is also active in neighbouring Burkina Faso which has seen a significant rise in conflict over the past year. Islamic State affiliates (the factions of Boko Haram, 'West African Province'), meanwhile, have stepped up their activity in Nigeria and Chad in recent months.

The Chadian response saw President Idriss Deby announce on April 10 that his country would no longer participate in the regional Multinational Joint Task Force combatting the extremists. This is a significant blow to counter-terrorism efforts in the region. The announcement came after the extremists' deadliest attack ever on the Chadian army (nearly 100 soldiers killed in an ambush in March).

POLITICAL SHIFT

MALAWI'S COURTS FLEX THEIR MUSCLES AGAIN

In February, Malawi's Constitutional Court threw out the electoral commission and President Peter Mutharika's application to suspend the landmark judgement that last May's presidential election results be annulled because of irregularities.

Fresh elections were set for 2 July 2020, but with Covid-19 that date is in doubt. Back on the campaign trail, Mutharika tried to curry favour by announcing on 5 April that his cabinet would take a 10% pay cut in order to redirect money to the fight against Covid-19.

Just over a week later he announced a 21-day lockdown would begin on April 18. With bans on political rallies – indeed, on any gathering of more than five people – any opposition campaign would be hamstrung, not to mention election organising efforts (such as registration). However, courts issued a temporary injunction against the lockdown on 18 April pending a judicial review which caused yet another twist in the saga.

Will the election go ahead? As the rerun election was ordered by the Constitutional Court, and not the electoral commission, it is the court that must decide on any postponement. Meanwhile, the tenure of current commissioners ends in June, so there are questions over who will oversee the process when it does proceed.

EMERGENT RISK/ OPPORTUNITY

COVID-19'S HUMAN AND ECONOMIC TOLL

In mid-April the World Health Organisation (WHO) announced that provisional modelling forecast that the number of Covid-19 infections on the continent could reach as many as 10 million. In separate modelling of the pandemic, researchers at Imperial College London said that under an optimistic scenario, over 100 million could be infected and 300 000 people could die.

However, modelling the course of a pandemic is far from straightforward as behaviour changes throughout the forecast period. The Imperial projections, which informed much of UK and US policy, have been thrown into doubt.

Even more complex than forecasting the pandemic's path is predicting the likely impact it will have on the economy. With countries in lockdown, tourism non-existent and unlikely to revive soon, oil prices at 20-year lows, and other commodities taking a knock, African economies are expected to suffer severely. The International Monetary Fund's (IMF's) best estimates published in its April see gross domestic product (GDP) falling by around 3.4% in Nigeria and 5.8% in South Africa, the continent's biggest economies, while Zimbabwe is expected to record a contraction of 7.4%.

The IMF is preparing to help bail out debt-distressed nations as the G20 and Paris Club creditors said they would temporarily suspend debt service payments. China, too, said it would consider debt relief measures.

NOTABLE DATES

- 20 May – Burundi presidential election
- July – Malawi presidential election
- October – Ivory Coast presidential election
- 4 October – Tanzania general election

