

Maintaining Regional Stability amid Complex Regime Transitions in Africa: Challenges and Opportunities for COMESA Member States

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Abstract

With a market reach of approximately 600 million people and straddling 21 countries, the COMESA bloc occupies a vast chunk of the continent. Contemporary literature on the region generally points to huge macroeconomic potential in as far as the holistic developmental and wealth creation projections are concerned. Nonetheless, a sizeable number of COMESA countries have, from time to time, experienced phases of complex regime transition, a state of affairs that comes with an aura of regional instability, thereby undermining the prosperity prospects of a trading bloc that boasts a combined GDP of US\$ 768 billion. Over the past decade, a sizeable number of these countries have been faced with one form or another of political turmoil and assorted civil strife, especially within the context of regime transitions and/or change of power from one government to the next. Against this background, through the lenses of neofunctionalism and liberal institutionalist theories, this paper examines the question of how best to ensure and/or maintain regional stability in the midst of such complex regime transitions, with the view of teasing out the challenges and opportunities before offering sustainable policy recommendations for COMESA countries.

Key words: Regional stability, complex regime transitions, neofunctionalism, liberal institutionalism, COMESA

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1. Introduction

Established in the early 1980s as the Preferential Trade Area for Eastern and Southern African States (PTA) and subsequently reconstituted and renamed the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA), COMESA has continued to champion trade and economic integration in the region (COMESA, 2023a; Mwale, 2017). COMESA consists of 21 countries located in eastern and southern Africa, namely Burundi, Comoros, Democratic Republic of the Congo (DR Congo), Djibouti, Egypt, Eritrea, Eswatini, Ethiopia, Kenya, Lesotho, Tunisia, Libya, Madagascar, Malawi, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, Rwanda, Seychelles, Somalia, Sudan, South Sudan, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe. With nearly 600 million people, slightly below half the population of Africa, and with a combined gross domestic product (GDP) of US\$ 768 billion, COMESA is the largest regional economic community (REC) in Africa (COMESA, 2023a). At its core, COMESA seeks to promote regional integration through trade and the development of natural and human resources. Indeed, COMESA has achieved a number of successes over the years, including the establishment of a free trade area in 2000, the development of common customs and investment policies, and the implementation of a number of cross-border infrastructure projects.

The social, political and economic hiccups notwithstanding, the economic stability of COMESA member states has improved in the last three decades. It was projected that in 2023 the average GDP growth rate of COMESA countries was to average at 4.5%, which was higher than the global average (IMF, 2023). This growth was motivated by a number of aspects, including increased investment, strong consumer demand and improved trade performance among member states and other countries in the region and the world. COMESA member states have also made progress in reducing inflation and budget deficits. In 2023, the average inflation rate of COMESA member states was 6.5%, down from 8.5% in 2022. The average budget deficit of COMESA member states declined from 4.0% of GDP in 2022 to 3.5% of GDP in 2023 (COMESA, 2023b).

However, the economic projections of the COMESA region risk glossing over regional fragility caused by politico-security challenges in member states – challenges born out of undemocratisation trends, especially chaotic regime transitions. The ensuing political instability has reared its head in the COMESA region in the form of armed conflicts (South Sudan, Ethiopia, Sudan, DR Congo, Mozambique and Somalia), ethnic violence (Kenya, Ethiopia, DR Congo and

Sudan), military coup d'états (Madagascar, Egypt and Sudan), violent extremism and terrorism (Somalia, DR Congo and Mozambique) and challenges related to governance facing COMESA countries such as Zimbabwe, Uganda, Sudan and others. Such fragilities not only affect the COMESA region's economic projections but also regional trade through the disruption of relations, economic and industrial production, public policy and main supply routes. Uncertainty in relations and the lack of lasting stability in member countries further affect investment, infrastructure development and regional integration efforts within COMESA. This article makes a case for COMESA stability in member countries as a recipe for growth. It further considers democratising and institutionalising governance, peace and security mandates in COMESA as a recipe for regional stability. Against this background, this article analyses the current state of the COMESA bloc and highlights its economic potential and regional significance. The article examines the historical context of complex regime transitions and political instability in various COMESA countries and identifies the specific instances of political turmoil and civil strife within COMESA nations, for example in Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Somalia, Eastern DR Congo and Sudan. The paper also investigates the impact of sociopolitical tension and power transition uncertainties, especially during campaign and election seasons, on investments in manufacturing, trade, commerce and exchange in countries such as Madagascar, Kenya, Uganda and Malawi. The author explores the challenges and opportunities presented by complex regime transitions within the COMESA region. The article proposes policy recommendations that promote regional stability in the midst of complex regime transitions.

2. An overview of the COMESA region

COMESA countries have strong macroeconomic potential. The region is endowed with abundant natural resources, a young and growing population and a strategic location. The member states in this trading bloc have an abundance of natural resources, including minerals, agriculture and energy resources. For instance, DRC has abundant reserves of base metals such as cobalt, copper, nickel, zinc, lead and manganese; precious metals such as gold, silver, and platinum; and industrial ones such as tantalum, diamonds, tin, lithium, coltan, iron ore, bauxite, coal and uranium. Zambia has deposits of base metals such as copper, cobalt, nickel, manganese; precious metals including gold and silver; industrial minerals for example emeralds, gemstones, limestone, dolomite, coal, iron ore; and energy

minerals such as coal and uranium. This endowment of resources provides significant potential for economic growth and development at not only the country level, but also the regional economic community level (Adika, 2022).

Beyond natural resources, many member states also possess fertile land and favourable climatic conditions for agricultural productivity all year round. This sector has considerable potential for growth, food security and export earnings. Diversifying agricultural products and improving value chains can contribute to economic development. Agriculture is already contributing significantly to economic growth, employment and food security. In COMESA, the agricultural sector constitutes over 32% of the GDP, furnishes approximately 65% of raw materials for industry and engages nearly 80% of the regional population in employment. Its GDP share varies from 6% in Mauritius to 49% in Burundi. Agriculture plays a vital role in enhancing the income and living standards of a substantial portion of its populace. On average, the livestock sector contributes more than 35% to the agricultural GDP and 30% to foreign exchange earnings (Gakunga, 2021). Agriculture stands as a crucial pillar for ensuring food security in COMESA countries. With a population of over 500 million people and projections indicating an expected increase to over 800 million by 2050, the agricultural sector will face the imperative task of significantly increasing food production to cater to the needs of this expanding population (Abdi et al., 2023). The foregoing statistics strongly suggest that COMESA is a trading bloc on the verge of great heights.

However, COMESA member states and the trading bloc as a whole face ominous political and governance sector challenges, including complex regime transitions that may undercut the region's potential. In fact, according to the continuum of political stability from very low to very high, about 65% of regional countries' political stability is medium (World Bank, 2022). With medium stability being COMESA's best index, with the exception of Mauritius and Seychelles which are in the 'high political stability quintile', regional stability is inarguably delicate given the high possibility of sliding from medium to low with any level of political or security disturbance, especially during elections or protests (World Bank, 2022). Table 1 below shows a clustering of COMESA countries according to World Bank's Political Stability and Absence of Violence/Terrorism Index.

Table 1: Levels of political stability in Africa

Cluster 1 Very low political stability	Cluster 2 Low political stability	Cluster 3 Medium political stability	Cluster 4 High political stability	Cluster 5 Very high political stability
Ethiopia	Democratic Republic of the Congo	Djibouti	Mauritius	None of the listed countries have a very high political stability index
Somalia	Libya	Egypt	Seychelles	
South Sudan	Burundi	Eswatini		
Sudan	Eritrea	Comoros		
		Kenya		
		Lesotho		
		Madagascar		
		Malawi		
		Mozambique		
		Namibia		
		Rwanda		
		Uganda		
		Zambia		
		Zimbabwe		

Source: World Bank, 2022.

This clustering was established using the most recent data available, dating back to 2021. It is crucial to bear in mind that political stability is subject to change over time, which implies that the accuracy of this clustering may diminish in the future (World Bank, 2022). However, it is evident that the COMESA member states in Cluster 1 are located in Eastern Africa and the Horn of Africa, all grappling with substantial political instability and violence in recent years. Most COMESA member states in Cluster 2, also located in East and North Africa, have experienced political instability and violence to a lesser degree than Cluster 1. Cluster 3, characterised by geographic diversity and encompassing nations from all corners of Africa, presents the most varied range of political stability, with disparities between countries. Cluster 4, consisting of two East African countries,

is recognised for its relatively high political stability in the African context (World Bank, 2022). This categorisation of African nations based on political stability underscores the extensive variations that exist across the continent. Some nations exhibit very low levels of political stability, while others demonstrate a higher degree of political stability. These differences can probably be attributed to a multitude of factors, including economic development, political institutions, as well as social and cultural influences that create an environment of potential complex political transitions.

Complex political transitions refer to the multifaceted processes through which political systems undergo structural transformations. These processes encompass changes in governance, political institutions, power distribution and societal norms. Unlike linear models of political change that focus on a straightforward shift from one regime type to another (for example, from authoritarianism to democracy), complex political transitions are characterised by their non-linear, multi-dimensional nature. These transitions often involve overlapping phases of democratisation, state-building, conflict resolution and institutional reform that are shaped by diverse internal and external forces (Carothers, 2018).

In a complex political transition, factors such as ethnic divisions, economic inequalities, historical legacies and international influences intersect to create a dynamic environment where political outcomes are uncertain and subject to frequent reversals. The process is often marked by hybrid political systems that blend democratic principles with authoritarian practices and which result in ambiguous or unstable governance structures (Levitsky and Way, 2010). These hybrid regimes can display elements of competitive elections while simultaneously curtailing civil liberties and political freedoms. This makes the transition unpredictable and prone to setbacks.

External actors, including international organisations and foreign governments, play a significant role in shaping complex political transitions by providing aid, imposing sanctions or offering diplomatic support (Brown, 2019). Their involvement can both stabilise and complicate the transition process because differing geopolitical interests influence the direction and pace of reforms. Understanding complex political transitions requires a multi-layered analytical framework that integrates political, social and economic dimensions, which highlights the importance of context-specific factors in determining the success or failure of political change.

3. Methodology

The study pertaining to this article employed a qualitative research design that involved a desktop review of critical documents, including COMESA, IMF and World Bank reports, academic journals, books and other relevant materials. The objective of the review was to identify and analyse the key challenges and opportunities for maintaining regional stability in the midst of complex regime transitions in the COMESA region. Specifically, the following stages were involved in the research methodology. First, the author began with the identification and selection of relevant documents. The searches were conducted using various search engines and databases, such as Google Scholar and JSTOR as well as reviewing materials in print. Second, when the relevant documents were identified, they were carefully analysed to extract key findings and insights. The analysis was conducted using a thematic approach, with the aim of identifying the key challenges and opportunities for maintaining regional stability in the midst of complex regime transitions in the COMESA region.

4. Theoretical framework

In analysing the complexities of maintaining regional stability during complex regime transitions within the COMESA region, the study employed the Kantian Triangle which positions democracy, international institutions and international trade as building blocks of peace, security and stability (Kant, 1949; Kravanja, 2023). Immanuel Kant's triad is mostly applicable to understanding inter-state peace or regional peace and stability. His theorisation helps to explain the basis or driving factors for peace and stability in certain regions of the world with similar political culture and regime types (democracies), intense economic and commercial relations, and regional institutional frameworks to drive intergovernmental relations such as the European Union (EU), South East Asia (Association of South East Asian Nations–ASEAN) and North America (United States Mexico and Canada– USMCA free trade area), among others.

Principally, Immanuel Kant, in his 1795 work on *Perpetual Peace*, argues that trade relations, especially free trade, build connections, networks and communication links among states (Dorussen and Ward, 2010). Such networks are built around complex interdependency between and among economies, which makes conflict between them irrational and mutually damaging to their economic and commercial interests (Dorussen and Ward, 2010). The economic relations

exchanged over time increase the opportunity cost for military conflict between trading partners of significance (Martin et al., 2008). Trade therefore establishes peaceful relations between and among states or ensures inter-state peace the more countries exchange volumes of goods, services and investment capital or transactions (Gartzke and Li, 2003).

Kant further ascribes the pacifying effect of democratisation: democracies' foreign policy-making rationality is fundamentally based on the political cost of choices back at home (Russett and Oneal, 2001:137). As such, democracies avoid wars that could be costly and lengthy as public opinion could shift to aversion and push the regime to incur political and strategic losses. Further, democracy creates the highest prospect of freedom and lowest likelihood of conflict within themselves. As a ripple effect of 'peace' in democracies, regions with democratic countries are thus bound to experience higher levels of peace and stability. Kant argues that democracies are better at managing dissent, conflict and claims and are less likely to go to war with each other also because of shared political values and culture.

Lastly, Kant argues that international organisations (IOs) function to promote relations between countries to ensure peace (Russett and Oneal, 2001:170). Such organisations drive unity of purpose and ensure states work in concert with common interests in a cooperative manner. As such, IOs transform zero-sum calculations, which usually tends to create conflict and instability in inter-state relations into positive sum for predictable relations, peace and stability. In fact, where IOs are intergovernmental organisations (IGOs), such as COMESA, the membership of regional countries helps the region adopt multilateralism in addressing issues and common interests and values. In turn, this helps to reduce the risk of military conflict (Russett and Oneal, 2001:176).

5. Peace and stability in COMESA member states

Peace and stability are indispensable prerequisites for sustainable economic growth and development. Economies thrive in peaceful environments and investors are more likely to invest in countries that are politically stable. Economic growth can lead to increased prosperity for member states (Mensah, 2019). One of the main objectives of the RECs such as COMESA is to promote intra-regional trade. When member states are stable and at peace with each other, as well as internally, they are more likely to engage in cross-border trade. Peace and stability also have a direct impact on the well-being of a region's population. In stable

environments, access to education, healthcare and other essential services is more assured. A peaceful society is more likely to focus on social and human development. Therefore, regional organisations such as COMESA require member states to cooperate politically on various issues, including economic policies and trade agreements.

Despite wide consensus among scholars and practitioners on the importance of a politically stable environment (Farooq et al., 2023; Pata et al., 2022; Radu, 2015), COMESA countries continue to experience varying levels of political instability. This hinders the prospects of a prosperous region through the bloc. Member states that are currently severely affected by internal strife include those in Cluster 1 on Table 1: Ethiopia, Sudan, Somalia and South Sudan. Ethiopia is recovering from one of the worst civil unrests in its history. Between late 2020 and November 2022, fighting between the federal government and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) led to hundreds of deaths and displacement of millions of people.

The Pretoria Peace Agreement signed in November 2022 between the Ethiopian federal government and the TPLF has seen both progress and challenges in the year after its signing. Positive developments include the TPLF's removal from its terrorist designation and the establishment of an inclusive interim administration in Tigray (Nyadera and Osedo, 2023). In addition, trust-building measures have been implemented, such as federal representatives being able to visit Tigray without a security escort. The agreement has also paved the way for significant humanitarian aid delivery by lifting a de facto blockade on Tigray. This allowed access to critical supplies such as food, medical aid and essential services (Gebresenbet and Tariku, 2023).

However, significant obstacles remain, particularly in areas of disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) of Tigrayan forces (Dessie et al., 2024). The DDR process has been slower than anticipated, and concerns about the retention of arms by Tigrayan forces have led to skepticism in the Amhara region. Issues regarding territorial disputes in Western and Southern Tigray also persist, which complicate the implementation of the peace deal. These disputes have led to a divergence in approaches between the Tigrayan and Amhara sides, with differing views on the status and control of these territories (Gebrehiwot et al., 2023).

While there is a semblance of peace, there are still pockets of violence, especially in the Amhara region, between the military and local Fano militiamen (a word

which loosely translates from Amharic as ‘volunteer fighters’) (Plaut and Vaughan, 2023). This conflict has exerted a substantial influence on COMESA. The warfare has engendered disturbance in the domains of trade, pointedly hampering the exchange of goods and services between Ethiopia and other member states of COMESA. Due to the conflict, contractions in trade were observed between Ethiopia and COMESA member states, which exacerbated the economic toll of the conflict. Foreign direct investment (FDI) in Ethiopia was severely impacted by the protracted conflict, with a considerable decline witnessed in 2022⁵. Investors have expressed apprehension regarding Ethiopia’s political and economic instability, rendering them hesitant to commit resources to the country (Demissie, 2023).

The conflict has wrought extensive damage due to bombings on Ethiopia’s infrastructure, including roads, bridges and ports. This directly affected the country’s capacity to facilitate the transport of goods domestically and export to fellow COMESA member states (Beshir, 2022). The consequences of the conflict extend to food security in Ethiopia, a country already profoundly reliant on food imports. The war significantly disrupted the importation of foodstuffs and culminated in a situation in which in 2022 over 20 million Ethiopians faced acute food insecurity. To put it succinctly, the conflict in Ethiopia represented a significant humanitarian catastrophe and a big obstacle to regional integration in Eastern and Southern Africa, particularly within the purview of COMESA. Its enduring impact, as demonstrated by economic contractions, trade disturbances and humanitarian crises, signaled a formidable setback for the region and underscores the dire need for political stability within member states to foster COMESA’s objectives (Beshir, 2022).

In Sudan, the ongoing conflict between Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) that started in April 2023 has claimed the lives of close to 15 000 individuals. By September 2023, over nine million people had been displaced, and more than 1.1 million had sought refuge beyond Sudan’s borders (UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 2024). Before this spate of conflict, Sudan was already reeling from back-to-back demonstrations following the coup that toppled Omar al Bashir in 2019 (Onamu and Nyadera, 2024). This means that since 2019, Sudan has not been stable (Ibrahim, 2023).

5 Macrotrends indicating an FDI investment of US\$ 3.67 billion, a 13.84% decline from 2021.

The Sudan conflict has also had a significant impact on the country's infrastructure. According to a World Bank report by Hallegatte et al. (2023), the cost of damage to infrastructure caused by the conflict is estimated to be at least US\$ 10 billion, which includes damage to roads, bridges, schools, hospitals and power plants.

As the conflict escalated, Sudan's trade with COMESA member countries predictably declined, principally due to disruptions in production and transportation routes. In addition, the conflict diminished the number of investment opportunities in Sudan, rendering it a less appealing destination for FDI. Consequently, Sudanese businesses have encountered greater challenges in competing within the COMESA market. The ongoing conflict has also hindered Sudan's active engagement in COMESA activities, including meetings and trade shows. In turn, this has posed obstacles for Sudanese businesses seeking to establish connections with potential partners and customers from other COMESA member countries. Furthermore, the conflict has driven up the operating costs for businesses in Sudan, encompassing increased fuel prices and heightened security expenses, which further impedes their competitiveness in the COMESA market. Despite the Sudanese government's commitment to participating in COMESA and fostering regional integration, the ongoing conflict within the country continues to present significant challenges.

In Somalia, the last 30 years have been punctuated by conflict and political instability. Somalia continues to grapple with a tumultuous political landscape that has significantly impacted its economy. The country's situation can be understood through the lenses of state collapse, clan-based politics, external interventions and the struggle for stability (Shay, 2017). Somalia descended into state collapse following the ousting of Siad Barre in 1991, which led to the emergence of competing warlords and clan-based factions. This political fragmentation eroded central authority and made it nearly impossible to establish a functioning government. The successive subsequent years saw ongoing civil conflicts, a lack of security and the proliferation of militant groups such as al Shabaab (Shay, 2017). The international community intervened with peacekeeping missions, most notably the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM), now African Union Transition Mission in Somalia (ATMIS). The peacebuilding efforts in Somalia have produced mixed results. On the one hand, the country has been able to establish a government in Mogadishu while, on the other hand, clan militias, terrorist groups

and renegade states continue to challenge the legitimacy of the government in place (Nyadera et al., 2024). The influence of foreign powers, regional actors and international organisations has added complexity to Somalia's political landscape, often prioritising their interests over the needs of the Somali people (Shay, 2017).

The economic impact of this political instability has been devastating. Somalia's economy has been characterised by informality, a lack of infrastructure and endemic poverty. The ongoing instability continues to negatively affect the business environment and the government's ability to collect taxes. Insecurity and piracy have disrupted trade, particularly in the vital maritime sector. The political situation in Somalia has also had a significant impact on COMESA. While Somalia is a founding member of COMESA, the country's political instability has made it difficult for it to participate fully in the organisation's activities. The civil war in the country led to the destruction of infrastructure, the displacement of millions of people and the rise of insecurity. This made it difficult for Somali businesses to trade with other COMESA member states. The war has also made it difficult for the Somali government to implement COMESA's trade and investment policies.

6. Complex regime transitions and impact on COMESA

6.1 Egypt, Libya and Tunisia

COMESA's operations have often been hampered and reflect the complex interplay between political dynamics and regional economic integration. Egypt, Libya and Tunisia have all experienced tumultuous political transitions, which have had varied consequences for COMESA. Egypt, as one of the founding members of COMESA, is also among members with the biggest economies. The regime change in 2011, which led to the ousting of President Hosni Mubarak, raised serious concerns about Egypt's commitment to regional integration. This situation was made more complex and uncertain by the instabilities that followed the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood. The resulting coup and return of a military regime complicated the status of Egypt as a COMESA member, given the legitimacy queries that faced the military regime. Economic challenges in post-revolution Egypt also affected its participation in COMESA programmes. Nevertheless, with the establishment of a more stable regime under President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, Egypt's commitment to COMESA was confirmed, and the bloc regained a reliable partner. Egypt's commitment to the objectives of COMESA and its active participation in its various activities have helped strengthen the organisation's role

in promoting economic cooperation and development in the eastern and southern African regions (ElFar and Momtaz, 2017). For example, Egypt can leverage its robust industrial base, manufacturing sector and strategic geographical position to facilitate trade with other COMESA member countries. In addition, Egypt hosted several high-profile COMESA meetings and summits, highlighting its commitment to advancing regional cooperation through strategic leadership and initiatives.

The regime change in Libya in 2011 was marked by a violent civil war that eventually led to the fall of the Muammar Gaddafi regime. This had significant repercussions for COMESA as Libya had been an active member since joining the organisation in June 2005. The ensuing instability, fragmentation and insecurity effectively affected the country's role in the bloc, especially in trade and economic activities (Velonjara and Andrade, 2020). The Libyan crisis also disrupted economic activities in the region, including trade and investment, which affected COMESA's objectives of regional economic integration. The organisation was unable to engage Libya in regional integration initiatives and the country's instability contributed to uncertainty in the region. As Libya remained embroiled in internal conflicts and political disputes, the potential contributions it could have made to COMESA remained largely unrealised (Velonjara and Andrade, 2020).

Tunisia's revolution in 2011, which also marked the beginning of the Arab Spring, to a certain degree had different implications for COMESA (Adika, 2022). Tunisia had not become a member of the organisation until 18 July 2018. The transition from the authoritarian rule of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali to a more democratic and inclusive system opened up opportunities for greater involvement in regional integration. Tunisia's political transformation allowed it to align more closely with COMESA's goals and principles (Adika, 2022). The new government expressed a desire to strengthen its participation in the organisation, which contributed to its efforts to enhance regional trade, investment and cooperation. Tunisia's experience in political transitioning also offered valuable lessons for other COMESA member states, promoting a more cooperative approach to governance and policy development.

6.2 DR Congo, Madagascar and Malawi

As revealed in the case studies of Egypt, Libya and Tunisia, the implications of regime transitions on COMESA operations are multi-layered and nuanced in nature. Such transitions have yielded both disruptive challenges and transformative opportunities, as shown in Tunisia. The key challenge springs from

the change of the dynamics between COMESA and its member states. When a new regime ascends to power, its distinct priorities and objectives often diverge from its predecessor, prompting shifts in COMESA's policies and practices and a potential loss of institutional continuity. In 2018, the DRC experienced a regime change marked by the election of President Félix Tshisekedi who succeeded President Joseph Kabila. During the early stages of Tshisekedi's administration, he adopted a more cautious stance towards COMESA integration. However, his administration has been credited with enhancing the position and role of the DRC within the organisation through improving connectivity and infrastructure, peace and stability, and through expanding DRC's regional integration and economic reforms (Nagar and Nagar, 2022).

In addition, regime transitions entail the risk of political instability as new administrations may grapple with power consolidation, divert their attention from COMESA activities and diminish the organisation's efficacy in achieving its objectives. For instance, the political crisis in Madagascar in 2013, against the backdrop of a coup d'état in 2009, led to its suspension from COMESA, a crisis that endured for several years and that significantly affected COMESA's operations in the region (Adika, 2022). Madagascar experienced a period of political instability following a disputed election that led to a decline in foreign investment and a slowdown in economic growth. The manufacturing sector was particularly hard hit, with many businesses closing down or reducing production.

Even so, amidst these challenges, regime transitions can offer opportunities for reform and enhancement. New administrations may be more receptive to novel ideas and approaches that could lead to constructive changes in COMESA's policies and practices. An exemplar of this is Ethiopia, which, in 2018, underwent a regime change with the election of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed. Ahmed's administration initiated a series of reforms, such as economic liberalisation and privatisation, political and diplomatic reforms as well as infrastructure development that enhanced Ethiopia's appeal to foreign investors and fostered increased trade and investment between Ethiopia and other COMESA member states.

6.3 Election-related tensions

Electioneering periods in most African countries are every so often punctuated with heightened tension and uncertainty that can be attributed to various factors.

A historical backdrop of political instability looms large in many African countries, with a troubling legacy of coup d'états, civil wars and contested elections. This historical baggage can breed a pervasive fear of potential violence and unrest during election periods, casting a shadow of doubt and apprehension over the electoral process. To illustrate this, consider the case of Kenya, a COMESA member state, where the violent aftermath of the 2007 presidential election resulted in significant turmoil and loss of life, underscoring the historical challenges of ensuring a peaceful transition of power (Ochieng et al., 2023). The weakness of institutional frameworks in many African countries also compounds the issue. Fragile institutions, including the lack of a robust, independent judiciary and free press, pose obstacles to the peaceful and equitable resolution of electoral disputes. These weaknesses can undermine the credibility of electoral processes and reduce public trust in the system.

High levels of poverty and inequality have also been documented to exacerbate the situation. Widespread poverty and inequality can foster social unrest and increase vulnerability to political manipulation. Citizens grappling with poverty may be more easily swayed by politicians who promise quick fixes, sometimes at the expense of long-term stability and good governance. As an example, both Kenya and Uganda grapple with significant poverty and inequality issues, which political actors often exploit to garner support. Sometimes this contributes to social tensions during election periods.

Another key factor contributing to electoral tension is the exploitation of ethnic and religious divisions by politicians during campaigns. These divisive tactics can stoke increased tension and conflict among different groups, which undermines the spirit of unity and cooperation. In Kenya, for instance, the use of ethnic identity as a political tool has been a recurring issue, with some politicians leveraging ethnic affiliations to secure support, thereby heightening the potential for intergroup conflict. Similarly, Uganda has experienced political campaigns marked by the manipulation of religious affiliations, further exacerbating societal divisions and contributing to election-related tensions. In this context, heightened tension and uncertainty during election periods have the propensity to disrupt economic activities and trade, impacting COMESA's efforts to promote regional economic integration. Disruptions can deter foreign investment and hinder the organisation's goal of fostering intra-regional trade. COMESA has established the Committee of Elders to mediate conflicts and disputes arising from contentious

elections. The historical backdrop of political instability in many member states, such as coups and civil wars, underscores the importance of conflict resolution within the region.

7. A reflection on the impact of regime transitions, political instability and uncertainties

There is no doubt that the operational dynamics of COMESA are often deeply influenced by regime transitions, political instability and socio-politico-economic uncertainties. These complex factors pose difficult challenges. First, they instigate an environment of ambiguity that leads to a reduction in trade and investment activities, thereby exerting adverse implications on COMESA's economic vitality and the socio-economic welfare of its populace.

Second, political and economic instabilities precipitate disturbances within supply chains, amplifying the complexity and cost associated with cross-border movement of goods and services. Consequently, this erodes the competitiveness of COMESA's enterprises and diminishes its appeal to foreign investors, which undermines the core objective of COMESA – to promote economic cooperation and integration among its member states. Included in this is the establishment of a common market and the removal of trade barriers to facilitate the free movement of goods and services within the region. Regime transitions and political turmoil further tend to create room for a rise in corruption and other economic contraventions, thus eroding the inviolability of legal frameworks and weakening the institutional framework of COMESA. In turn, this impedes business activities within the region.

Third, the political dynamics also have the capacity to enervate governmental effectiveness and efficiency, which obstructs the implementation of COMESA's policies and agendas, thus impeding the region's pursuit of its economic development objectives. While the main argument here is that COMESA should promote democratisation for regional stability, the sub-argument is that shared political values and norms will also bring stability to regional integration policies and processes. Volgy and Schwartz (1994:24) rightly argue that “relations between nations are established and progress based on what is understood to be patterned behaviour. When those patterns are broken, interrupted or reversed, the effects can be felt throughout the system, generating greater conflict and uncertainty between states most affected by major changes in the status quo”.

The unpredictability of COMESA's public and foreign policies places at risk their maintenance and admission of member states with different regime types. Conversely, the widespread adoption of democracy will guarantee common patterns of behaviour and reciprocity, hence stabilising policy and making policy change effects more predictable in the COMESA region.

8. Existing opportunities to foster political stability among COMESA member states

COMESA's Treaty was founded to underscore the importance of democracy, good governance and the rule of law. The bloc also has numerous programmatic activities that support its member states in promoting these values, such as the COMESA Governance, Peace and Security Programme of the COMESA Treaty (Article 3[d]) (COMESA, 2023b). The Governance, Peace and Security Programme stresses that peace and security are integral for economic growth, and that COMESA aims to strengthen economic integration and development by addressing these issues. Various stakeholders, such as COMESA parliamentarians, civil society and private sector entities, are all involved in these efforts. Collaboration with member states and other regional groups is also encouraged to prevent duplication and rivalry (COMESA, 2023b). Through this programme, COMESA has played a mediation role in a number of conflicts in its member states, including Burundi, the DRC and Madagascar. It is also worth noting that COMESA has established a number of conflict prevention and resolution mechanisms, such as the COMESA Committee of Elders and the COMESA Early Warning Mechanism. Nonetheless, these two offices face almost similar challenges that negatively affect their effectiveness. These include lack of political will, inadequate resources, insufficient public engagement and awareness. They also face the challenge of lack of incorporation into other conflict prevention mechanisms within COMESA and the continent.

Besides its conflict prevention and management role, COMESA's Governance, Peace and Security Programme could further expand efforts to promote democratic and good governance in member states. Such efforts would not only stabilise the region but also promote regional integration to boost COMESA's economic and commercial output, especially intra-COMESA trade, investments, infrastructure development and industrial growth. The situation of chaotic regime transitions within COMESA is an indicator of incomplete political development in the region. As Qobo (2007:1–3) argues:

“... the old model of regionalism [in Africa], cast on the ideology of Pan-Africanism [does not suffice to drive regional integration today] ... and the problem with Africa’s regional integration project as well as its slow and tortuous integration into the global economy is an integration of incomplete states”.

COMESA should thus promote a set of shared political values apart from Pan-Africanism to help member states attain uniformity in political fundamentals upon which to drive economic development and regional integration (Huxsoll, 2003). Values such as democratic, civilian, participatory and inclusive governance will help to establish political predictability and stability, as well as trust among member states, all of which are important drivers of regional integration. Shared political values reduce information asymmetries and help member states to easily diffuse political tensions before they can escalate into conflicts that destabilise the region (Martin et al., 2012). In fact, democracies have structural constraints on foreign policy making that are more limiting towards capricious change than structural constraints on foreign policy making in non-democratic regimes (Huxsoll, 2003). It is here that stability is found for the COMESA region.

COMESA’s economic integration programmes, such as the COMESA Free Trade Area and the Customs Union, have also helped to promote economic growth and development in its member states. For instance, in Kenya, the COMESA Free Trade Area has led to a significant increase in trade with other COMESA member states. In 2020, the total value of Kenya’s exports to COMESA states was approximately US\$ 1.3 billion, while imports were around US\$ 850 billion. This saw an increase in 2023 where the value of Kenya’s exports to COMESA states had risen to about US\$ 2 billion, with imports reaching approximately US\$ 1.1 billion. Also, trade between Kenya and Rwanda has increased significantly since the COMESA Free Trade Area was established in 2000 (COMESA, 2023 b). This has made Zambia more attractive to foreign investors, which has led to an increase in investment in the country. In Malawi, COMESA’s investment in infrastructure development has helped to improve connectivity between Malawi and other COMESA member states. It is now easier for businesses in Malawi to transport goods and services across the region, which has boosted economic growth and created jobs.

9. Conclusion

The COMESA region, encompassing 21 countries and a population of approximately 600 million people, presents significant economic potential with a

combined GDP of nearly US\$ 800 billion. Over the years, COMESA has made remarkable strides in achieving economic stability, with projected growth rates exceeding the global average. This progress is underpinned by the region's abundant natural resources, agricultural potential and a growing population. However, the region faces persistent challenges, notably complex regime transitions and political instability, as evidenced by the clustering of member states based on political stability.

The article had several objectives: it analysed the current economic importance of the COMESA bloc, investigated historical cases of intricate regime transitions and political instability within its member states, and explored how sociopolitical tensions during election periods influence investment patterns. Drawing from neofunctionalism and liberal institutionalism theory, the article outlined a comprehensive framework for assessing and managing the challenges posed by complex regime transitions. COMESA countries can maximise their economic potential and work towards greater stability in the face of complex political transitions. A brighter future for the entire region is foreseen by taking the measures identified and promoting regional cooperation and integration.


This article has emphasised the critical importance of peace and stability in the COMESA region for sustainable economic growth and development. Political stability and security are essential to fostering economic prosperity, intra-regional trade and the well-being of the population. However, a significant number of COMESA member states have grappled with varying degrees of political instability, complex regime transitions and election-related tensions, which have posed formidable challenges to the region's prospects for prosperity. These challenges have disrupted economic activities, supply chains and institutional frameworks, which has hindered COMESA's ability to achieve its goals of regional integration and economic cooperation. Nonetheless, there are existing opportunities to foster political stability among COMESA member states through the organisation's governance, peace and security programmes, economic integration initiatives and mechanisms for conflict prevention and resolution.

As a way forward, the article presents a set of policy recommendations for COMESA to consider.

Policy recommendations

- COMESA should continue providing support for democratic institutions and processes in its member states. This could include supporting the rule of law, independent judiciaries, free and fair elections and a vibrant civil society through technical assistance, capacity building and financial support.
- COMESA should be actively involved in mediating conflicts and supporting dialogue between different stakeholders to prevent or resolve crises. This can be done through its own mechanisms, such as the COMESA Peace and Security Committee, or in collaboration with other regional and international organisations.
- COMESA should promote good governance and accountability by developing and implementing standards and norms, and by providing support to member states to implement these standards. This can include supporting the fight against corruption, promoting transparency and participation in government and strengthening oversight institutions.
- Economic crises can often be a trigger for complex regime transitions. COMESA should provide economic support to member states to help them weather economic storms and reduce the risk of instability. This can be done through trade and investment promotion, financial assistance and technical cooperation.
- COMESA should promote human rights and sustainable development as a way to address the root causes of complex regime transitions. This includes supporting the protection of human rights, promoting inclusive economic growth and investing in social development.
- COMESA should learn from ECOWAS' early intervention. ECOWAS has a strong track record of early intervention in conflicts between member states that has helped to prevent conflicts from intensifying and causing instability. COMESA can learn from ECOWAS's experience and develop more effective mechanisms for early intervention in conflicts between its member states.
- On the diplomatic front, COMESA should learn from ECOWAS about their success in using preventive diplomacy to address potential conflicts between member states. This includes engaging in dialogue with belligerents in

member states to identify and address potential sources of tension. COMESA should therefore develop more robust preventive diplomacy mechanisms.

- COMESA should learn from the EU in terms of building strong regional institutions. Robust and credible institutions can play a vital role in preventing and resolving conflicts, promoting peace and security, and supporting economic development. The EU has a number of strong regional institutions, such as the European Commission, the European Parliament and the Council of the EU. COMESA can strengthen its own regional institutions, such as the COMESA Court of Justice and the COMESA Intergovernmental Committee, to make them more effective in promoting peace and stability in the region. 

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