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Using Alternative Power to Mitigate Violence: Examining the Role of Non-State Actors on Conflict Dynamics in Africa

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Abstract: This paper investigates how non-state actors, particularly scholars and intellectuals, can serve as an alternative source of power in mitigating violence, transforming conflict dynamics in fragile African states. It was motivated by the persistent failure of state-centric approaches to address the structural roots of conflicts in settings marked by weak governance, historical oppression, and institutionalized marginalization. The core objective was to examine the role of academic voices and critical discourse in challenging state narratives, exposing structural violence, and fostering sustainable peace. The study employed a qualitative case study design relying on secondary sources such as conflict reports, literature, and institutional data. The M23 rebellion in the Democratic Republic of Congo was selected due to its representation of ethnic exclusion, failed peace process, and absence of intellectual engagement in conflict resolution efforts. It was anchored in theoretical frameworks combining the theory of structural violence, three-dimensional power theory, and the powercube model. The framework was due to their ability to illuminate how power is exercised not only through coercion but also through hidden and internalized forms of oppression. The study also provides a lens to evaluate how scholars might intervene at different levels and forms of power to disrupt cycles of violence. Findings reveal that the absence of non-actor groups like M23 fills the governance vacuum. The paper argues that scholars possess untapped potential to serve as an alternative power. The study recommends enhancing the visibility and integration of academic contributions into conflict resolution frameworks.

Keywords: Africa, Alternative power, Conflict dynamics, Non-state actors, Structural violence.

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Introduction

In contemporary global governance, the dynamics of power and conflict continue to challenge the traditional state-centric power. The concept of power is not merely confined to visible political struggles but extends into the realm of structural violence, where institutions, policies, and ideologies systematically oppress marginalized groups (Gaventa, 1980; Lukes, 2021). As Lukes posits in his three-dimensional view of power, power is most impactful when it is unseen and when it shapes people's perceptions and preferences in ways that prevent resistance. This covert form of power ensures that systemic oppression remains unchallenged, rendering injustices normative and unchangeable.

John Gaventa (1980) similarly highlights how historical oppression has conditioned the powerless to accept their subjugation as inevitable. Through a complex interplay of coercion, agenda-setting, and ideological conditioning, state institutions maintain power by restricting participation, shaping consciousness, and excluding grievances from public discourse. State authorities often use their institutional power to enact what Balfour et al (2020) define as administrative evil, the systematic, bureaucratic execution of policies that perpetuate harm. These mechanisms illustrate how the concept of administrative evil, as articulated by Balfour et al. (2020), is no longer isolated misconduct but an embedded, structural reality that perpetuates dehumanization and moral inversion. Cases such as the Abu Ghraib prisoner abuse scandal illustrate how state machinery employs systematic oppression to silence dissent and reinforce its authority.

Structural violence is distinct from direct violence in that it operates through institutionalized inequalities and systemic barriers rather than overt acts of aggression (Galtung 1969). Government and elites use structural mechanisms, legal frameworks, and ideological control to suppress opposition and maintain their dominance. Structural violence against opposition movements is exhibited in the form of legal persecution, media suppression, economic exclusion, and bureaucratic repression (Galtung 1969). Several countries across the world have formalized these institutions to

neutralize opposition while creating an impression of legitimacy (Galtung 1969).

To demonstrate the global reach and diverse tactics of structural violence, the section outlines case studies from authoritarian regimes and democratic regimes. In Turkey the government under President Erdoğan is accused of systematically eroding opposition by using judicial harassment, mass arrests, and media suppression (CNN, 2015). Following the botched coup plot in 2016, over 77,000 individuals, from journalists and scholars to Kurdish activists, were arrested with inexact anti-terror legislation (Amnesty International, 2022). Independent media outlets like Zaman and Cumhuriyet were forcibly closed, as pro-government conglomerates seized nearly 90% of the mainstream media (Reporters Without Borders, 2023). Repression affects opposition politicians, including Kurdish leader Selahattin Demirtaş, who remains incarcerated on politically driven charges, despite the European Court of Human Rights ruling (2020) for their release

Observers note that Poland employs bureaucratic repression, using legal tools to discredit and criminalize opposition parties (Thomson 2024). The Kremlin labels critics as "foreign agents" or "extremists," essentially justifying repression against civil society organizations (AFP, 2024). In 2021, the Alexei Navalny Anti-Corruption Foundation was outlawed, driving activists abroad or to jail (Human Rights Watch, 2023). Other laws, such as the Undesirable Organizations Act of 2015, criminalize foreign NGOs to prevent foreign oversight of Russian politics. The government also employs vigorous censorship rules, such as barring so-called "LGBT propaganda," further restricting dissent in morally justificatory terms (Freedom House, 2023). Despite geographical and political differences, these regimes use structurally embedded tools of legality, media control, and economic coercion to suppress this while maintaining a facade of democratic legitimacy.

In India, the BJP administration has used economic and cyber tools to suppress minority and activist groups, particularly Muslim and Dalit communities. The discretionary freezing of non-governmental organization (NGO) funds under the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA, 2010) incapacitated human rights organizations, as in the case of Amnesty International India in 2020. Moreover, long-term internet outages such as the 300-day 2019-2020

Kashmir blackout operate to suppress political opposition and constrict information circulation (Access Now, 2023). Legal tools such as the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA) are employed to focus on activists and journalists under the guise of national security. Through such tools, the government exercises both online and economic control to drive opposing voices to the margins while obtaining legal impunity for its actions.

The United States also demonstrates structural violence, particularly in its electoral and judicial apparatus. Though less blatant than in authoritarian systems, voter suppression measures disproportionately disenfranchise Black and Latino populations. Gerrymandering, disenfranchising voter ID legislation, and felony disenfranchisement are impacting 4.6 million Americans, systematically suppressing political engagement by marginalized communities (Sentencing Project, 2022). Furthermore, surveillance of Black Lives Matter activists through FBI counterterrorism programs replicates the historical Counter-Intelligence Program (COINTELPRO) methods used to sabotage civil rights activism (ACLU, 2021). These institutionalized obstacles are designed to limit oppositional movements without the use of state violence.

Governments employ structural mechanisms to hold back dissent without compromising legal and administrative legitimacy. Legitimacy as described by Suchman (1995), refers to the widespread belief or assumption that an entity's actions are viewed as desirable, appropriate, or acceptable within a framework of socially established norms, values, beliefs and definitions. Legal persecution is the primary mechanism, witnessed through fabricated charges and anti-protest laws such as Turkey's Disinformation Law (2022). Economic strangulation weakens opposition organizations by denying them funding and freezing assets, as in India's FCRA clampdown on NGOs. Manipulation of information is a powerful tactic, with regimes assuming a monopoly of media and restricting access to the internet, as the Russian blocking of VPN services demonstrates. Finally, bureaucratic exclusion denies access to selected groups through discriminatory laws, as with the historic withdrawal of citizenship rights from Kinyarwanda speakers in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).

In this context, therefore, structural violence enables states to neutralize dissent without overt brutality, maintaining repression alive by institutional legitimacy. Whether by Turkey's judicial machinery, Russia's foreign agent laws, India's digital authoritarianism, or the United States voter suppression laws, the script is always the same: if dissent is criminalized, resistance is either driven underground or raised to rebellion. While much has been written about the roles of Civil Society Organizations, the question remains why the role of scholars has remained underexplored, particularly in the African context, where state fragility persists. The puzzle is at the heart of this paper, investigating how intellectual and academic engagements might serve as a form of alternative power and be capable of altering conflict dynamics.

The Role of Non-State Actors in Exposing Oppression

Non-state actors (NSAs) serve as an essential counterbalance to state-backed structural violence in staging against oppressive systems, ensuring accountability from authorities, and advocating for those without a voice. Different stakeholders, such as academics and reporters, civil society organizations (CSOs), and whistleblowers, act as victims' guardians to report wrongdoing that governments aim to hide. These actions not only undermine existing power structures but also ensure transparency, human rights, and involvement in democracy.

Individuals within state bureaucracies can also exploit their positions to commit wrongdoing. Whistleblowers and data leaks have emerged as powerful instruments for revealing corruption and other forms of wrongdoing. Tools like signal and Signal and Secure Drop enable whistleblowers to share information confidentially, fostering collaboration among investigative journalists. A notable instance of this is the 2016 *Panama Papers leaks,* which were uncovered by the international consortium of investigative journalists (ICIJ). This investigation revealed widespread offshore tax evasion schemes, resulting in the resignation of prominent political figures such as Iceland's Prime Minister Sigmundur Davíð Gunnlaugsson and Pakistan’s Nawaz Sharif (ICIJ, 2016. While these whistleblowers play a crucial role in enhancing transparency, they often encounter significant backlashes for their actions. State authorities frequently counter leaks with misinformation; for example, Russia's

government dismissed Navalny's corruption exposés as baseless (Smeltz et al. 2021).

Strategic legal action is another way for NSAs to challenge state repression, particularly when the issue concerns public interests. Groups such as the Center for International Law (CenterLaw) have staged legal actions to curb governmental misconduct. A clear illustration is when the Philippine government was scrutinized for extrajudicial killings amid Rodrigo Duterte's war on drugs. By documenting more than 30,000 unlawful deaths and calling for International Criminal Court intervention (ICC), these NGOs pushed for a formal investigation in 2023(Human Rights Watch, 2023). This move compelled police forces to scale down overt killings and pressured Duterte.

Popular mobilization remains a key NSA tactic, activating mutual aid networks, alternative reporting of human rights abuses, and decentralized leadership tactics in an attempt to counter the state. Sudan's Resistance Committees are a classic example of this approach, operating through underground youth networks that organize general strikes, barricades, and covert media campaigns. (BBC, 2023). They were instrumental in toppling dictator Omar al-Bashir in 2019 and have continued to oppose him even after a military coup in 2021 (BBC, 2023). The local networks can create alternative governance frameworks, for example, Sudanese activists drafted a people's constitution to challenge military rule. However, the very decentralized structure that gives such movements strength can also lead to fragmentation and hinder negotiations with the state (Doctors Without Borders, 2021). The effectiveness of NSAs in resisting oppression is dependent upon several variables, including international solidarity, secure cyber infrastructure, and legal protection for activists and whistleblowers.

1.4 Scholars and Intellectual Discourse

Scholars and researchers are crucial in the process of deconstructing institutional hegemony through critically analyzing power structures and state discourses. Through literary production, political theory, and empirical research, they expose veiled systems of domination, offering intellectual paradigms that shape resistance movements and inform policy reforms. Steven Lukes' (2021) radical power theory highlights the strength of intellectual discourse in confronting dominant ideologies by

revealing hidden forms of coercion and manipulation. Through analyzing state violence and systemic injustices, researchers develop counter-narratives that hinder the normalization or silencing of oppression.

Literature is a significant academic weapon against oppression. In this context, scholars frequently use satire, allegory, and realism to critique authoritarian regimes. A notable example is Chinua Achebe's A Man of the People (1966), which follows the experience of Odili, a visionary young teacher. His confrontation with Chief Nanga, a representation of moral decay in the critical landscape of a newly independent nation, highlights ethical challenges faced in governance. Achebe's academic work not only decries the greed and despotism of African leaders but also exposes how patronage in politics maintains oppression (Dadja-Tiou, 2018).

Similarly, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's Petals of Blood (1977) critiques the political landscape of post-independence Kenya, revealing the betrayal of the masses by the ruling elite who were once seen as liberators. In a bold move, Ngugi chose to write Gikuyu instead of English for work Caitaani Mutharaba-Ini (1981), signifying his commitment to cultural resistance and highlighting how the language serves as a battleground in the fight against neocolonial oppression (Smoleń, 2016).

Beyond literature, scholars in fields like political science and sociology have developed conceptual frameworks to explain state repression and violence. Michel Foucault's (1975) Discipline and Punish critically analyzes how contemporary states exert their control through surveillance and institutional control to show how the subjects internalize discipline without manifest coercion. Similarly, James C. Scott's (1990) Domination and the Arts of Resistance explores everyday resistance among dominated groups, from veiled messages to counter-hegemonic jokes, demonstrating how intellectual criticism is not always articulated as overt rebellion but as hidden resistance. Together, these works offer a playbook of lessons for contemporary resistance movements by illuminating how oppressive regimes maintain control and how opposition can be organized effectively.

Academic criticisms of state repression are not merely abstract; they also influence real-world activism and policymaking. Academic critics like Noam Chomsky

have long deconstructed state propaganda, laying bare the mechanisms through which democratic states manufacture consent for war and economic exploitation. In Latin America, Eduardo Galeano's The Open Veins of Latin America (1971) provided a critical analysis of economic imperialism, detailing the mechanisms by which external and internal elites collaborate to repress indigenous populations. Paul Farmer's (2005) research on structural violence has more recently reshaped the debates on global health, illustrating mechanisms by which economic and political structures generate suffering among poor communities. These examples demonstrate that intellectual debate does not remain confined to the ivory tower; rather, it actively informs grassroots resistance and policy discussions.

Notwithstanding this, the academics' role in opposition remains open to criticism. Some researchers argue that intellectual discourse often remains inaccessible to the very people it aims to empower. Theoretical opposition to oppression, couched in technical language written in learned journals, tends to get disconnected from tangible opposition. Furthermore, academia is not immune to state influence. Here, there were cases where Scott faced persecution for speaking out against the government. Academic critics of the state in authoritarian regimes face prison time, like in cases of Turkish academics dismissed under Erdoğan's purges (HRW, 2018) or Chinese intellectuals silenced for discussing democratic movements (Goldman, 2009). Even open society, corporate sponsorship at universities can undermine academic independence. For example, scholars who criticize neoliberal policies often struggle to secure grants (Goldman 2009).

Despite such challenges, the academy remains a significant space for challenging oppression. The sustained popularity of the works of Achebe, Ngũgĩ, and Foucault, and the rise of online activism spearheaded by academics, are evidence that intellectual discourse is a living and powerful tool. In literature, political theory, or policy engagement, academics provide the vocabulary and analytical frameworks that allow movements of resistance to challenge state discourses and advance justice.

The Media as a Counterforce to State Propaganda

Independent media is a necessary check on state power by documenting and revealing abuses that would be otherwise unreported. As Stone

(2012) argues, political stories are commonly made and spun by power brokers, and hence, objective reporting is needed for democratic accountability. Investigative reporters, web-based media, and alternative news portals evade state censorship to reveal corruption, human rights violations, and institutional failures. In doing this, they educate citizens, dispel disinformation, and place authorities in the spotlight.

Civil Society Organizations and Grassroots Mobilization

The constriction of civic space has emerged as a hallmark of political existence in a growing number of nations. Global civil society organizations are encountering organized attempts to diminish their credibility and efficiency (Brechenmacher, 2017). Competing security and geopolitical interests have muddled U.S. and European responses, with governments divided over the value of aggressive pushback versus continued engagement (Brechenmacher, 2017). Human rights groups and CSOs have stood at the center of resistance, using legal lobbying, public activism, and people's action against repression. They have recorded violations, helped the victims, and lobbied for changes at great risk to themselves. By building up local and global pressure, they compel authorities to uphold international human rights law as well as democratic norms, even in very oppressive settings.

Whistleblowers and Activists: Risks and Resistance

Whistleblowers and activists have a uniquely dangerous but unavoidable role in exposing administrative evil, turning up corruption, war crimes, and institutional abuses that oppressive institutions prefer to conceal (Olesen, 2021). As Balfour et al. (2020) note, these individuals usually face dark reprisals, including imprisonment, exile, or assassination. However, in spite of these dangers, their revelations can stimulate public indignation, legal action, and organizational changes, illustrating the intense conflict between government confidentiality and openness.

Overall, the conflict between government-backed structural violence and grassroots resistance highlights a persistent battle between oppressive authority and civic responsibility. Through research, journalism, activism, and advocacy, NSAs as an alternate power, bring hidden injustices to light and create possibilities for political engagement.

Their success, however, hinges on their ability to withstand repression, preserve public solidarity, and tread the thin line between exposure and survival. Even though their efforts do not always yield immediate change, they are indispensable in the long struggle against justice, keeping oppression from going unnoticed and reprimanded.

Objectives

The general objective of this study is to investigate the intersection of non-state actors, including media and civil society organizations, among other dynamics, focusing on how alternative power structures, such as scholars, can mediate violence in contexts of a weak state. Rice and Patrick (2008) define weak states as countries that lack the essential capacity and/or will to fulfill four sets of critical government responsibilities: fostering an environment conducive to sustainable and equitable economic growth; establishing and maintaining legitimate, transparent, and accountable political institutions; securing their populations from violent conflict and controlling their territory; and meeting the basic human needs of their population. The study intends to give insights into how to harness non-state actors (scholars) to leverage their potential for sensitization using literature in creating stability in conflict and fragile settings, especially on the African Continent.

Significance

The central task of this paper is to examine what fuels this contemporary nature of armed conflicts and other related armed struggles. My interest is not necessarily hinged on exploring whether there may be genuine reasons for resorting to conflict. Instead, it is based on what makes them survive and become so powerful. Non-state actors, including academics, can act as an alternative power source by challenging state institutions, permitting state narratives accountable. They play a crucial role in amplifying the voices of the persecuted, particularly in contexts where violence is deeply rooted. It is unfair to lose sight of the painful experience that leads to desperate decisions that fuel chaos and conflict that are disastrous and deadly.

The dilemma of searching for alternative power underscores the need for nuanced approaches to conflict dynamics, through the unmasking of the administrative evil and understanding strategies employed by state institutions to maintain power, which paves the way

for non-state actors, particularly academics, to lay counterstrategies and offer alternative power while fostering stability. This idea is hinged on the fact that scholars with academic integrity will be guided by rationality and not emotions or sentiments that can be counterproductive.

Theoretical Perspective

Structural Violence and Power

To better understand how States and non-state actors engaged in conflict dynamics, this section applies key theoretical frameworks on power and structural violence. The Structural Violence Theory, developed by John Galtung (1969), describes how institutionalized oppression and systemic inequalities inflict harm without the explicit application of physical force. Structural violence exists in social, political, and economic systems that are prejudicial to some and beneficial to others. It manifests itself as economic inequality, political exclusion, social discrimination, and policy-induced inequalities, inflicting long-term suffering on marginalized groups. Structural violence, in contrast to open violence, involves hidden harm embedded in institutions, and therefore it is difficult to oppose or break down.

This theory is most relevant to the explanation of how the state apparatus makes use of structural violence to oppress non-state players. Lukes (2021), in *Power: A Radical View*, posits that power is most effective when it is invisible, when it shapes perception and norms so deeply that individuals do not even realize their agency is constrained. This form of covert power ensures compliance not through coercion but through internalized consent. Gaventa (1980) extends this argument by showing how historically oppressed communities often accepted their marginalization as inevitable, having been conditioned to see their oppression as natural. In this way, Lukes' and Gaventa's framework together reveals how domination persists not just through force but through the shaping of consciousness and exclusion from decision-making. Building on these insights, Balfour et al. (2020) introduce the concept of administrative evil, where the bureaucratic systems normalize harm under the guise of policy or professionalization. This theoretical lineage from invisible power (Lukes), to internalized subjugation (Gaventa), institutional complicity (Balfour et al) offers a powerful lens to understand how structural violence is maintained.

Gaventa's (1980) approach to power likewise confirms that those affected by structural violence view their oppression as unavoidable, which makes it challenging for them to resist. In the Flint water crisis, which is addressed in Unmasking Administrative Evil, the government's inability to deliver clean water mainly affected marginal communities, demonstrating how structural violence functions in public administration (Balfour et al., 2020). Similarly, the criminalization of activism within authoritarian regimes is a manifestation of structural violence as it suppresses collective action and silences opposition before conflict occurs (Stone, 2012).

Structural violence theory underscores the agency of non-state actors to counter structural oppression. Through exposing injustices and demanding policy reforms, such actors challenge structures that uphold structural violence. But as can be seen in Lukes' (2021) discussion of three-dimensional power, state actors usually co-opt, suppress, or delegitimize other voices to stay in charge. Repression of investigative journalism, harassment of whistleblowers, and legal persecution of civil society organizations all show that the struggle between democratic accountability and authoritarian rule continues.

Literature Review

Non-State Actors and Intellectual Resistance

The study of armed conflict in Africa has historically focused on the state as both the central actor and the primary locus of analysis. The traditional paradigm in international relations and security studies has long portrayed the state as the exclusive guarantor of peace and security. Nonetheless, this viewpoint has been more frequently contested by empirical data and critical research highlighting the shortcomings of state institutions, particularly in authoritarian or postcolonial settings in achieving lasting peace or tackling the underlying causes of conflict (Zartman, 1995; Mamdani, 1996). In this aspect, researchers have focused on non-state entities and community initiatives as essential elements of peacebuilding.

Beyond the State

Current research recognizes that civil society groups, faith leaders, traditional figures, and community peacebuilders are essential in tackling grievances and reducing violence (Richmond and Mitchell, 2012; Richmond 2018, Mac Ginty, 2008).

These individuals frequently hold more credibility within the community and are more attuned to local requirements. In situations where state institutions lack strength or act with hostility, non-state entities offer crucial services and avenues for negotiation, justice, and reconciliation (Lederach, 1997). Nevertheless, much of this literature focuses on NGOs, faith-based organizations. Nevertheless, concentrating only on this aspect may lead to missing the more nuanced, yet just as significant, types of power involved and community leaders, while contributions of academics and scholars remain comparatively underexplored. This oversight is particularly significant as this paper argues that scholars can function as Powerful non-state actors in shaping conflict discourse and mobilizing alternative power.

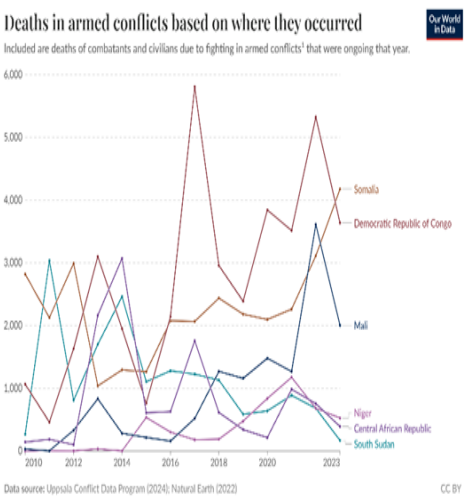
Academics as Political Agents

Although universities and academics are frequently seen as impartial observers or creators of knowledge, an increasing body of literature indicates that scholars can also function as political agents who shape narratives, affect policy, and galvanize resistance (Zeleza, 2009). In authoritarian systems, intellectuals have traditionally acted as moral guides and instigators of movements. From the fight against apartheid in South Africa to the Arab Spring protests, student organizations and educational institutions have been instrumental in rallying opposition, expressing complaints, and formulating ideas for different governance models. This dual role becomes special complex in African contexts, where intellectuals often operate at the intersection of resistance and state co-optation

Bayart (1993) presents the idea of "the politics of the belly," highlighting how African elites, such as intellectuals, may be integrated into corrupt and patronage-driven systems. This divided opinion on resistance and co-optation is essential for grasping the ambiguous role of intellectuals in African conflict situations. Zeleza (2006) suggests that although certain scholars have opposed militarization and repression, others have cooperated with authoritarian regimes for personal benefit. This duality raises questions about what conditions enable scholars to act as genuine counterforces to violence.

Alternative Power and Discursive Resistance

Critical scholars of peace and conflict underscore the significance of resistance contesting prevailing narratives that justify violence or suppress opposing perspectives (Foucault, 1980; Galtung, 1996). Scholarly endeavors, when interacting with the public, have the potential to reveal systemic injustices and create what Antonio Gramsci referred to as counter-hegemonic stories. These narratives are especially potent in societies where state propaganda and control over media limit open discourse.



Intellectuals who challenge the dominant epistemology of violence—especially in contexts like Sudan—can thus function as sources of "alternative power," not through coercion but through persuasion, framing, and agenda-setting.

Historical and Contemporary Context

Describing the intricate relationship between power and conflict requires a multifaceted framework that extends beyond traditional state-focused examinations. Researchers like Steven Lukes (2005), John Gaventa (1980), and Sharon Erickson Nepstad (2015) offer important frameworks for analyzing how non-state actors (NSAs) interact with, oppose, or alter power dynamics in conflict situations. Lukes' Power: A Radical View introduces a three-dimensional model that captures both overt and covert manifestations of power, while Gaventa's Power and Powerlessness explores how marginalized groups navigate systemic oppression. Nepstad's work on Nonviolent Struggle further expands this discourse by analyzing how resistance movements leverage alternative forms of power to challenge authoritarian regimes. Combined, these ideas offer a solid basis for evaluating how NSAs affect conflict dynamics.

This theoretical framework is particularly relevant when considering the underlying causes of renowned armed conflicts in African countries.

A comparative analysis chart indicates generalized data on deaths in the most renowned armed conflicts in Africa (UCDP and PRIO 2010-2023). Limited literature has been documented to assess the underlying causes of these conflicts. Academics and universities, expected to lead in critical discussions, often withdraw into theoretical concepts instead of addressing actual injustices in the world. Although academic freedom enables a thorough examination of systemic oppression, the inability to convert this understanding into practical advocacy diminishes its effectiveness.

A Framework for Conflict Mitigation

To analyze conflict dynamics and explore effective strategies for mitigation. This paper adopts Gaventa's *powercube* framework, which synthesizes power relations across the intersecting dimensions: forms, spaces, and levels of power. This approach moves beyond the state-centric views of power and allows for an emergence of a multidimensional understanding of how domination is sustained and how it might be disrupted, especially through the agents of nonstate actors.

Starting with Gaventa's forms of power, he argues that structural violence often appeared not through brute force, but through visible, hidden, and invisible forms of power. Power includes the legal frameworks and the institutional policies that marginalize dissent, while hidden power manifests through agenda control to exclude certain actors' voices or knowledge from public discourse. Invisible power shapes norms and worldviews, convincing people to internalize subjugation as natural. In African conflict zones, state narratives and donor discourse mask ethnic repression, economic exclusion, and the historical grievances that scholars can help uncover through critical knowledge production and reframing.

The *powercube* also distinguishes between closed, invited, and claimed spaces. Currently, the closed spaces are those from which citizens and non-citizens are excluded, such as military councils and formal meetings. Invited spaces involve nominal participation in the public arena but within set boundaries (Cornwall, 2002). In contrast, claimed spaces are created autonomously by the marginalized group where new narratives, demands, and resistance are cultivated.

Power also operates across multiple levels, from a household, sub-

national, national, and global levels. Often, grievances emerged locally mainly due to existing grievances such as ethnic exclusion, persecution, among others, shaped by the national policies and the silence of the international community. Effective conflict mitigation, therefore, requires bridging these levels from local actors to global understanding. Scholars can actively shape agenda reforms and even influence the international community to stage and challenge state abuses or failure to do their work of protecting citizens. Therefore, scholars and intellectuals, by virtue of their positionality, acting as transformative non-state actors, may help build these alternative forms of power. They can foster critical awareness, create space for marginalized voices, and legitimize counter-hegemonic discourses

Co-optation vs. Confrontation

Non-state actors navigate power structures through two primary strategies: co-optation, classified as using a power asymmetry to change the preferences that others have about particular ends and means (Najam 2000), and confrontation (challenging them directly). Rosemary O'Leary's (2014) concept of "guerrilla employees" illustrates how even embedded actors can subtly resist institutional oppression by using their positions to push for internal change. Meanwhile, Nepstad's (2015) research on nonviolent resistance highlights how strategic confrontation, such as mass protests, civil disobedience, and alternative governance structures, can effectively undermine authoritarian regimes. Co-optation has always failed to bring long-lasting peace to weak states, as it has been in South Sudan and the DRC. In South Sudan, following independence in 2011, the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) became the ruling party; however, it reportedly took on the same biased leadership that has caused the recurring civil wars. High-level leadership power-sharing pacts broke down into violent factionalism, resulting in the civil war from 2013 to 2018 that claimed over 400,000 lives (UN, 2020). In the DRC as well, a succession of regimes has inducted rebel movements like the M23 into the national army (FARDC) without addressing ethnic marginalization or persecution. This window dressing merely postpones conflict, as exemplified in M23's repeated rebellions (2008, 2012, 2022). Co-optation without structural change merely reuses violence under the cover of legitimacy.

An exclusively military approach to conflict by governments or rebels tends to fail because it ignores root causes. In South Sudan, violent crackdowns on opposition, such as the 2016 Juba massacre, alienated ethnic groups rather than calming them. In

the DRC, FARDC campaigns against rebel movements over decades have not shut down instability because they ignore disputes, Kinyarwanda speakers' citizenship, and illegal mineral trafficking (UN Group of Experts, 2023). While military victories may provide temporary control, without political and economic transformation, grievances will persist, and rebellion is likely to continue. As Nepstad (2015) argues, enduring peace requires reconciliation of structural injustices, not just defeating enemies on the battlefield. Co-optation strategies involve integrating opposition groups into governance structures, offering economic incentives, or creating participatory platforms that grant limited influence without fundamentally altering power hierarchies. Governments often use co-optation to pacify opposition groups while maintaining control, as seen in corporate social responsibility initiatives that appease activist groups without enforcing real labor or environmental reforms.

Confrontation mechanisms include mass mobilization, parallel governance structures (e.g., rebel-held administrations), and transnational advocacy networks. These approaches often provoke state backlash but can also force concessions or systemic change when sustained over time (Lukes, 2021). The choice between these strategies depends on contextual factors such as regime type, available resources, and the strength of civil society. In some cases, hybrid approaches, where NSAs simultaneously engage in dialogue while maintaining pressure through protests or sanctions, prove most effective in achieving policy shifts (Nepstad, 2015).

Conflict Dynamics and Governance Vacuums: The Role of Non-State Actors

In fragile states where the authority of the government is lacking or in contention, non-state actors (NSAs) frequently intervene to cover governance gaps by offering security, justice, and social services. These organizations, from community-based groups to armed militias, become alternative power centers in areas where state institutions do not exist or are ineffective. Their conflict dynamic is complex, for they can sustain stability through the provision of essential services or destabilize through competition and war. Structural inequality is one of the primary drivers of the proliferation of NSAs in governance vacuums. Economic disparities, ethnic exclusion, and competition for

resources provide fertile soil for conflict, as marginalized groups search for alternative means of claiming their rights and accessing opportunities (Gaventa, 1980). In states where political authority and wealth are concentrated in the hands of a narrow elite, marginalized communities turn into rebel movements. However, while some movements provide required services and mobilize marginalized populations into collective action, others utilize grievances for political or economic purposes, sustaining cycles of violence.

In addition to structural forces, psychological considerations are significant conflict dynamics and governance vacuum drivers. Collective trauma, fear, and resistance identities perpetuate violence by reaffirming inter-communal suspicion and discouraging reconciliation (Balfour et al., 2020). In most conflict areas, grievances dating back to the past are transmitted across generations that reinforce victimhood and justify ongoing resistance. For instance, in societies recently affected by war, armed factions can maintain their legitimacy within communities by portraying their struggle as a continuous battle for justice, even in the presence of a formal peace treaty to cease hostilities. In the absence of joint endeavors to address psychological traumas and promote intergroup conversation, efforts to resolve conflicts will probably be shallow and short-lived.

Additionally, transnational dynamics strongly influence the role of NSAs in government lacunae. Diaspora communities, external governments, and transnational NGOs are some forces from outside the state that have the power to empower or destabilize local NSAs (Lukes, 2021). Diaspora donations can fund rebellion groups, and foreign governments can strategically support or disempower certain groups to advance geopolitical interests. While global NGOs might attempt to construct governance structures with the help of humanitarian relief and capacity-building programs, their presence sometimes creates dependency or competition among locals. External intervention adds a complexity factor to governance vacuums because NSAs can shift objectives based on resource availability and allies to them.

Understanding the role of NSAs in conflict processes and governance vacuums requires a multi-dimensional perspective that addresses economic inequalities, psychological factors, and transnational dimensions. While

some NSAs stabilize by filling governance gaps, others exploit such vacuums to exercise power and control, further entrenching conflict. To address these issues, not only do state institutions need to be strengthened, but also NSAs need to be engaged in ways that promote accountability, legitimacy, and sustainable peacebuilding.

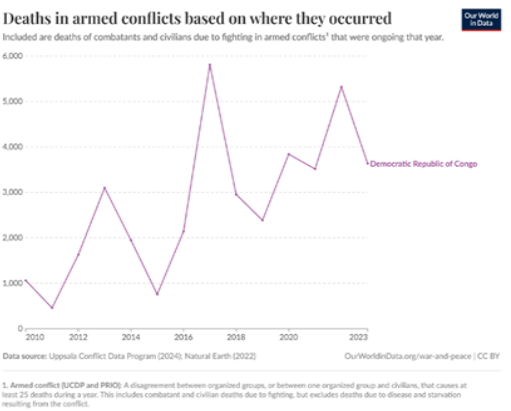
Gaps in The Literature

Although extensive research exists on civil society and grassroots peacebuilding, there are limited studies that specifically investigate how academic actors, as an alternative power, can contribute to mediating or reducing armed violence in general. The contributions of public intellectuals, scholars, and activist educators tend to be mostly anecdotal or insufficiently theorized. Additionally, a significant part of the existing literature often revolves around revolutionary or transitional periods, with minimal focus on the ongoing involvement of intellectuals during prolonged crises.

However, since I am an African scholar, this paper seeks to fill that gap by investigating how scholars and academic institutions may act as non-coercive sources of alternative power in conflict-affected societies on the African continent. The study aims to highlight the latent potential of academia as a peacebuilding force in environments of structural and overt violence. Academics have insufficiently focused on structural violence in Africa.

Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative case study design to explore the role of scholars as non-state actors in African Conflict dynamics. The study



employs Galtung's theory of structural violence, Lukes' dimensions of power, and Gaventa's powercube as interpretive lenses. The M23 in DRC was selected purposively as it represents a context marked by prolonged visible and invisible forms of repression and notable absence of intellectual or academic intervention. Data were gathered from secondary sources, including academic research, conflict reports by international organizations. Discourse from state and non-state

actors was reviewed. To understand how power is exercised. The theoretical framework was applied systematically: Galtung's model revealed the underlying structures of oppression, and Gaventa's powercube helped to analyze where alternative power might emerge or be suppressed. The study does not include primary fieldwork or interviews; the depth and triangulation of secondary sources support the credibility of the analysis.

Findings

Case Study: M23 movement in the Democratic Republic of Congo and Historical Grievances

To ground the theoretical analysis in real real-world context, the paper turns to the case of the M23 in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). The DRC is emblematic of chronic structural violence with weak institutions, contested authority, and systematic exclusion. The M23 offers a particularly relevant case examining how power operates. By applying Lukes' three dimensions of power, Galtung's concept of structural violence, and Gaventa's *powercube*, the paper explores how the state maintains control and how the absence of engaged, empowered intellectual voices creates a vacuum filled by armed groups. The alternative, intellectual forms of power remain underutilized in African conflict mitigation, and their absence reinforces the cycle of violence.

The DRC has a series of security challenges, notably ethnic conflicts and skirmishes, leading to the rise and formation of rebel groups such as M23. Beginning with Belgian colonial rule (1908-1960), Congo's vast mineral wealth was exploited, and its indigenous people faced forced labor, systemic discrimination, and other sorts of abuse (Anadolu Agency, 2022). The assassination of Patrice Lumumba in 1961 and the rise of Mobutu Sese Seko (1965-1997) had no impact on reinforcing corrupt governance, marginalizing ethnic communities, and weakening state institutions (Lowes & Montero, 2020). The chart reflects the fluctuating effects of deadly armed conflicts, illustrating how security in DRC has remained fragile since 2010. However, academic work has often underestimated the severity of the situation (Data UCDP and PRIO, 2010). The further marginalization of the Congolese Tutsis, who were persecuted and thus fueled grievances that led to the formation of the March 23 Movement (M23) in 2012 (Man-Byemba, 2023). M23 was a splinter faction of the National Congress for the Defense of the People (CNDP), an insurgent movement aimed at advancing rights for the Tutsis in the area. The rebellion of the group was sustained by failed peace deals, state

corruption, and ethnic exclusion (Man-Byemba, 2023). The emergence of the CNDP was closely connected to flaws in the transition process that began, tentatively, to reunite the country in 2003 (Stearns 2012). Soon it became clear that some of the signatories to the peace deal, which committed all belligerents to joining the transitional government and merging their militia forces into the national army, had been hedging their bets. As for the CNDP, senior officers were promised key positions within the Congolese army and were given guarantees that they would not be transferred out of the Kivus. According to Stearns (2012) the agreement was formalized on 23 March 2009 with the formal signatures by the Kinshasa government. Although the date seemed unremarkable at the time, it gained historical significance when almost exactly three years later, the M23 rebellion was launched. Stearns further asserts that the Congolese government tried on several occasions to deploy ex-CNDP commanders outside the Kivus, beginning in September 2010. These attempts met with steadfast opposition from the former rebels, who cited security concerns, anti-Tutsi discrimination, and the fact that the campaign against the FDLR had not reached a satisfactory conclusion.

M23 First-Dimensional Power: Military Resistance

The M23 insurgency exemplifies Gaventa's levels of power through over and covert tactics. The group capturing of strategic cities such as Goma in 2012 sought to coerce the state into negotiations and assert control of contested spaces. Such guerrilla warfare and traditional forms of conventional war were utilized in order to push the government into political negotiation and assert its dominance over contentious lands (Koko, 2014). This aligns with Gaventa's level of power, where open confrontation illuminates direct exercise of power through military means. The DRC's response to these challenges further highlights how authority is contested and subsequent military intervention by the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the DRC (MONUSCO) and SADC forces (Baudon 2024).

M23 Second-Dimensional Power: Taking into consideration Local Grievances and International Diplomacy

In addition to direct military clashes, M23 exercised agenda-setting influence subtly by taking into

consideration local grievances and capitalizing on regional instability and, absence of government efforts to improve infrastructure in the region. Marginalization of the Kinyarwanda-speaking groups in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) goes deep into the past, traceable to the colonial era and fueled by post-independence politics.

The communities, mostly ethnic Tutsis and a section of Hutus, have over time been suspects, suspected to be "foreigners" or agents of surrounding Rwanda, yet many have settled in Congo for centuries (Nzobakenga, 2024). This systemic discrimination has spawned cycles of insurgency, displacement, and violence, with the latest being the M23 rebellion.

The chart reflects a worrying score on physical integrity rights compared to other countries where security is no better (Fariss et Al, 2020). Ethnic identities were rigidly sorted during Belgian colonial rule, perpetuating splits between "native" Congolese and Kinyarwanda speakers, who were often seen as outsiders. Since gaining independence in 1960, consecutive Congolese administrations have maintained this exclusion. Mobutu Sese Seko's government solidified discrimination via restrictive nationality legislation, notably in 1972 and 1981, which stripped most Kinyarwanda-speaking Congolese of their citizenship (Nzobakenga, 2024). These policies intensified tensions resulted in instances of ethnic conflict and compelled large-scale displacement.

Kinyarwanda-speaking Congolese, particularly in North Kivu, had endured continuous pogroms and ethnic massacres. In June 1993, independent sources estimated that more than 3,000 people, mostly Banyarwanda, had been killed in intercommunal violence in the North-Kivu region. To date, as many as 7,000 people may have been killed, triggering about 200,000 people have been displaced, most of them fleeing into the bush, health centers or churches. (Amnesty International, 1993). Tutsi groups were specifically targeted by various armed factions, including the Congolese military (FARDC) and Hutu-led organizations such as the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR) (Stearns, 2012). Despite all these conflicts, Kinyarwanda speakers continued to suffer from forced

displacement, land seizures, and extrajudicial killings, with the state implicated in many of these incidents. The rebellion of the M23 commenced in 2012, partly as a response to these old abuses. The group views staged involvement as a defender of the Tutsi's interests, capitalizing on local grievances rooted in past discrimination. Many Kinyarwanda-speaking youth have been drawn to M23 because of the lack of state protection and economic opportunity (Nzobakenga, 2024). The eastern Congo is underdeveloped, with little investment in basic infrastructure such as schools, hospitals, and roads, adding to the narrative of state neglect. Moreover, domestic politics complicate the conflict further, with Rwanda and Uganda having been accused of backing M23 to gain influence in eastern Congo and combating hostile armed groups like the FDLR (Ford, 2024).

Although there has been widespread documentation of abuses against Congolese who speak Kinyarwanda, the international community and the Congolese state, along with institutions such as the United Nations (UN) and the African Union (AU) are inclined to overlook ethnic targeting as a component of a broader conflict narrative of an international aggression issue. Erasure of local grievances has allowed M23 to position itself as the only force of resistance against state-led persecution (Nzobakenga, 2024).

This corresponds to Lukes' concept of second-dimensional power, emphasizing the control of agendas, setting the frame for policies, and blockages within institutions that silence opposing voices. In the context of agenda setting, the government of the DRC failed to address persecution issues of Kinyarwanda-speaking communities and resorted to framing the situation by externalizing its problems and presenting M23 as a foreign-supported insurrection to attract international intervention.

M23 Shaping Civilian Allegiances and Legitimizing Alternative Rule

M23 also exercised ideological control to acquire legitimacy amongst the civilian population in its-held territory. It attempted to govern territory under its control by ensuring security and social welfare and positioning itself as a superior alternative to the unsteady Congolese state. Fung's research illustrates how participatory dynamics can influence governance opportunities, highlighting the role of deliberative democracy and efforts made to address the voices of those who have

been marginalized. In a parallel manner, M23 leveraged local complaints staging as a protector of Kinyarwanda-speaking Congolese, who have long faced persecution, displacement, and discrimination by the state machinery. By advocating for the interests of these overlooked populations, M23 managed to establish its legitimacy and enhance its political influence, much like how participatory governance frameworks can engage disenfranchised communities.

One primary equivalence of Empowered Participation and M23's tactics is in the application of grievance at the local level as a political instrument. Fung claims that participatory democracy can serve as a tool for marginalized groups to push for policy reforms. Similarly, M23 justified its cause by confronting state forces to represent the marginalized Kinyarwanda-speaking society, who have historically been denied citizenship rights and have faced state-sponsored violence. By exposing these grievances, M23 achieves legitimacy by rallying with the affected communities and presenting itself as a substitute for the indifferent DRC government. This suggests Fung's assertion that governance institutions need to be attentive to local issues to prevent falling into conflict and rebellion.

Secondly, M23's ability to set the agenda for talks about regional stability is a recreation of the second-dimensional power dynamic articulated by Fung. Empowered Participation highlights how decentralized systems of governance can push back against centralized power by enabling marginalized voices to shape discourse. M23's self-framing as a defender of an oppressed minority allowed it to shape not only local public but also international debates on governance and security in eastern Congo. By positioning itself as a stabilizing force that was required, M23 forced the Congolese state and international community to address issues of ethnic exclusion, even if in the guise of military conflict rather than policy reform. This is an example of the general principle that power can be exercised not only through direct action but also by dictating the terms of political engagement.

Finally, Fung's critique of structural exclusion reveals the manner in which governance failure contributes to such rebellions as M23. Empowered Participation underscores how participation mechanisms fail to enfranchise the most marginalized

groups due to systemic barriers. Political and economic disenfranchisement of the Kinyarwanda-speaking Congolese has been the basis for long-standing chains of marginalization and rebellion in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The failure to include these groups within governance structures left fertile soil for conflict, thus proving Fung's argument that exclusion results in instability. M23's ascension can hence be seen as a consequence of direct structural failure in governance, where the lack of inclusive political representation made rebellion one of the viable options through which marginalized groups could have their interests represented.

Overall, Fung's Empowered Participation principles offer a compelling framework for understanding M23's strategy in the DRC. The rebellion's focus on local issues, its capacity to influence political dialogue, and its rise as a reaction to institutional neglect highlight the larger patterns of participatory governance or the lack of it. Although M23's approach is contentious, its rise emphasizes the critical role of inclusive governance in deterring insurgencies. Fung's analysis suggests that enduring peace in the region requires not just military responses but genuine political participation.

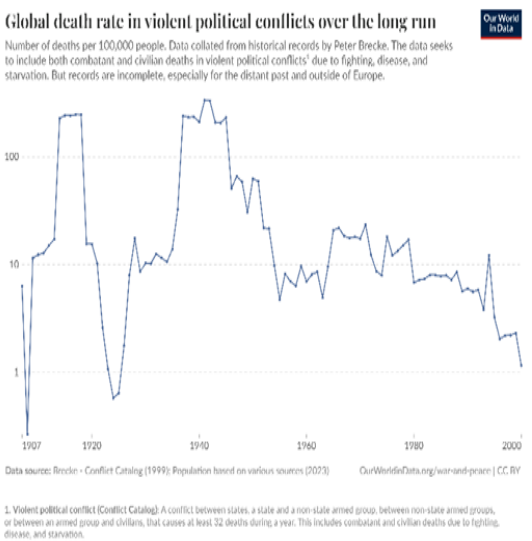
Similarly, Lukes' Third-Dimensional Power highlights how power operates through taking advantage of perception and ideological commitments rather than immediately through force. M23's ability to position itself as a substitute mode of governance illustrates the complex dynamics among armed groups, state weakness, and civilian agency. Portraying itself as a reform movement and not an insurgency, M23 sought to capture local trust and foreign sympathy. The group used sensitization, media mobilization, and alliances with local leaders to embed itself in the social fabric of North and South Kivu.

Analysis

In this part, the study highlights significant observations that reveal a critical gap in the existing literature regarding the documentation of accurate data. It also delves into the underlying causes of recurring conflicts with a particular focus on Africa. We understand that a significant challenge in tackling oppression and conflict is the issue of inaction, where individuals possessing the knowledge, power, and platforms to alleviate rising crises

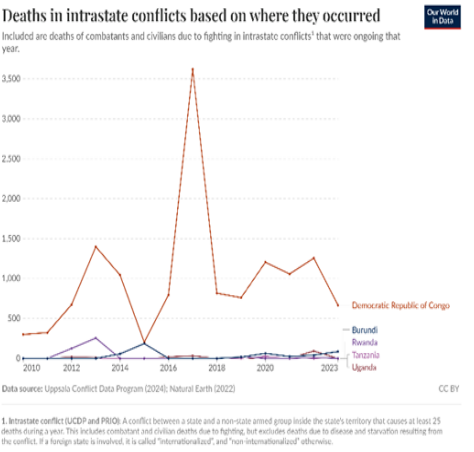
choose to remain silent until violence has already broken out. Researchers, educational organizations, the press, and other groups that influence public opinion frequently hold roles that allow them to identify warning signals, confront oppressive systems, and promote proactive measures (Miller, 2014). History consistently shows that silence or postponed reactions permit injustices to grow uncontrollably. This research acts as a wake-up signal, alerting those who can shape stories that their inaction causes pain just as much as the deeds of oppressors.

Statistics on Global Death rate in conflict.



According to Brecke from Word Data Records, data collected from historical records seeking to include both combatant and civilian deaths in violent political conflict indicates that data capture/entries on these global deaths in violent conflicts stopped in the year 2000. This is concerning, given the recuring to acts of violence over the past 2 decades. This cessation of data collection on deaths in violent conflict since 2000 presents a significant challenge for academic research. This gap inhibits a comprehensive understanding of contemporary violent trends, complicating analysis of causes and consequences. Additionally, policymakers may struggle to formulate effective interventions without calling on data on conflict-related deaths, potentially neglecting the urgent needs of affected populations. Furthermore, the lack of updated records limits the ability to address historical injustices and may introduce methodological biases in estimating the scale of contemporary violence. The absence of data underscores the critical need for renewed efforts in data corruption to inform research and policy frameworks.

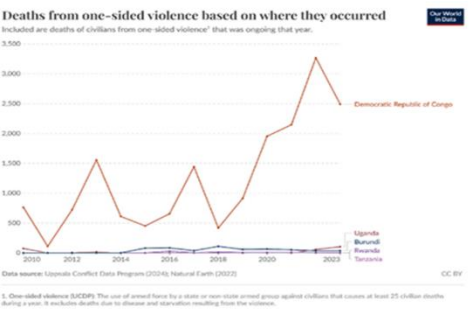
Nature of intrastate conflict in some EAC countries.



Intrastate conflicts are conflicts between a state and a non-state armed group inside the state's territory that cause at least 25 deaths during a year. This includes combatant and civilian deaths due to fighting but excludes deaths due to disease and starvation resulting from the conflict (UCDP and PRIO 2010-2023). The chart flags how DRC is endangered in the region compared to its neighbors, but is limited to scholarly publications influencing policies, raising public consciousness, or motivating resistance efforts. This raises a moral concern. Certain scholars, whether for self-protection or political allegiance, intentionally refrain from challenging oppressive governments, allowing state narratives to influence public opinion. This highlights a critical gap between academic research and real-world challenges.

Likewise, media organizations, acting as society's overseer, frequently neglect their responsibility to reveal the initial indications of government oppression. In certain situations, they are complicit censored, governed, or co-opted by influential entities that value stability more than justice.

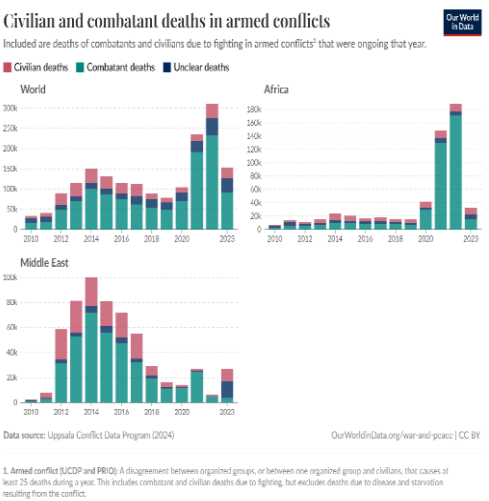
Nature of one-sided violence in some EAC countries



In this 2010 - 2023 chart, statistics of one-sided death in the EAC region plots DRC having a turnout of one-sided deaths and violence killing civilians compared to her neighbors including Rwanda, Burundi, and Tanzania (UCDP and PRIO). The ethical dilemma affects international entities and decision-makers who can act

in oppressive situations but frequently choose to intervene selectively or only when it suits larger geopolitical goals. In certain areas, human rights abuses prompt rapid international reactions, whereas others are overlooked because of strategic partnerships or financial interests. The outcome is a dual standard in humanitarian support, with certain groups gaining protection while others face extended hardship. This research questions the passive complicity of these entities and encourages them to transcend reactive measures, highlighting that preventing violence is significantly cheaper than intervening post-violence.

Africa Literature on civilian and combatant death in armed conflicts.



Between 2020 and 2013, Africa picks high, involving civilian and combatant deaths in armed conflict (UCDP and PRIO 2010-2023). However, a crucial moral inquiry is why those capable of interrogating the causes choose to stay quiet, and even data remains scanty on the African continent and who will advocate for the defenseless. This research serves as a reminder to non-state actors and influential individuals that "The world endures significant suffering." "Not due to the aggression of wicked individuals, but due to the quietness of virtuous individuals, as Napoleon Bonaparte said." However, monitoring and recording oppression is not enough; action is necessary, such as dialogue and engagement backed by physical facts. The duty to avert conflict and reveal injustice rests not only on victims and activists but also on all those with the privilege and capacity to raise their voices. Any reasonable person should not support violence, yet their silence often makes it the only option for those who lack other ways to resist.

Conclusion

This paper has explored the role of non-state actors, particularly intellectuals and scholars, as an alternative source of power within Africa and conflict dynamics. Drawing on Luke's theory of power, Galtung's concept of structural violence, and Gaventa's powercube,

the analysis has shown that power in African states is not only enforced through visible oppression but also systematic silencing and marginalization of dissent. The case of the M23 movement DRC illustrated how the absence of legitimately empowered Intellectuals often leads to armed struggles.

The central argument advanced here is that scholars and public intellectuals are not mere observers of conflict; they become critical actors in shaping discourses, exposing invisible violence, and generating alternative peaceful pathways or resistance. Yet their potential remains untapped in many African settings, either due to fear or other constraints or complicity within the systems they might critique; this silence is also reinforced by international academic think tanks. This silence has significant implications; it reinforces the state-dominated narratives, limits civic agency, and leaves vulnerable populations with limited nonviolent avenues for contesting oppressions. Future conflict mitigation strategies must therefore consider how to objectively engage intellectual actors, enabling them to function as credible, independent voices in the public sphere. Reclaiming intellectual space is not only an academic concern it is a political and moral obligation to mitigate conflict dynamics. Future research could benefit from engagement with intellectuals and scholars in conflict field of conflict studies to further explore their perspectives.

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