Africa is experiencing a rise in terrorism which, in addition to other humanitarian disasters, has caused mass migration and the loss of lives and property. Terrorist groups like Boko Haram and Al-Shabaab have continued to endanger the security of people’s lives and the survival of democratic governance in Africa and, unsurprisingly, the threat of terrorism has put Africa’s collective development and growth in even greater jeopardy. Economies have collapsed as investors shun countries affected by terrorism and, as statehood slowly deteriorates in some of the countries impacted by terrorism, political advancements have also been hampered.

One of the key factors contributing to the continued dominance of insurgency on the continent is the frailty of political institutions in most African countries. The blunt truth is that terrorism grows when the government is unwilling to combat it. Take the case of Nigeria as an example: The government’s longstanding unwillingness to engage in tactical warfare with Boko Haram has enabled the terrorist group to sharply increase its destructive activities and has created fertile ground for other insurgents to rise, and daily, the task of eradicating these groups becomes even more complex. Worries have been repeatedly expressed about the predicament of African countries in the face of internal and international terrorist attacks, as well as concerning potential repercussions for those African states that have been labelled as weak or failed states.
While different state actions have been carried out against terrorist groups, the lack of robust democratic institutions in Africa is a significant barrier to the success of counterinsurgency efforts across the continent. African nations have been unable to work together to combat insurgency due to acrimonious politics. A close examination of leadership structures in African nations reveals that most of them fail; how can success against the rebels be achieved in nations where the state and the people are constantly at odds? Moreover, the security structures of most African states are, in fact, relatively flimsy, and in many nations, domestic conflict further widens the security gaps and creates the conditions for insurgency to flourish. Internal conflict hinders African democratization and fosters rebel domination. It is even more concerning that leaders also use their nations’ insecurity as a platform to run for political office. Regrettably, most African leaders now place fighting terrorism at the top of their list of political priorities just because it elicits a lot of emotions that can sway elections in their favour and not because they genuinely want to tackle the scourge.

In debates about terrorism, technological progress is unavoidable. Terrorists in Africa are developing thanks to technological advancements. Terrorism and counterterrorism rapidly assume new shapes in their operations due to the expanding global instrumentalization of technology. Although both countries and terrorist organizations are modernizing their methods of operating, there is evidence that many terrorist organizations in Africa are rapidly creating technical solutions to enhance their lethal operations. The Internet, in particular, is one technological tool that is feared for its potential to significantly impact global security. Policymakers are concerned about how communication networks like the Internet may be used to carry out terrorist activities. Specialized websites and social media platforms are frequently used in conjunction with secured networks to set up chat rooms for talks and activity monitoring, to produce disinformation that can incite panic, and to conduct recruitment in Africa. Today, terrorist organizations like Boko Haram, Al-Shabaab, and others use untraceable video and audio recordings to broadcast attacks, demand ransom for hostages, and engage in other hostile activities.

Terrorism in Africa has a detrimental effect on the socioeconomic and political development of the region. However, it has been demonstrated that successful counterterrorism has benefited, or at the very least can improve, the socioeconomic and political environment of the continent. Like elsewhere on other continents, Africa has experienced significant terrorist activity, but the effects have been far greater in Africa than in other more developed continents. Terrorism continues to exist on the African continent despite the efforts of various African nations and regional and international organizations to combat it. The failure of the different counter-terrorism strategies launched to maintain long-lasting peace on the continent has exacerbated the continent’s underdevelopment and it continues to lag behind other continents in scientific, social, and political progress.

These are the reasons why it has become paramount for African counterterrorism efforts to keep up with technological advancements. Due to the unique characteristics of each nation, the specific insurgent groups, and the nature of operations, counterterrorism battles in Africa assume diverse forms and employ varied techniques. Departments, institutions, and programmes have been established in countries to address terrorism, and laws, regulations, and directives have been passed to guarantee the success of counterterrorism initiatives. In addition, new technologies are being employed to gather intelligence and prepare for counter-terrorism operations.

However, creating powerful political institutions is the first transition stage that African nations must go through. A nation’s political structure has a significant role in determining its security architecture. Launching counterterrorism investigations and addressing conflicts between the political class and those in important leadership positions with access to resources and intelligence that could jeopardize government efforts is the second transition stage. As a result, corruption and money laundering are curbed, closing doors to money that may be readily transferred to fund
terrorists. Additionally, collaboration with the public is required to create a community-policing operation. By acting as informants and providing the necessary information to security personnel, citizens will be involved in the security architecture of African states. African nations must also calm ethnic tensions that could lead to domestic conflict because internal weakness in a nation creates favourable conditions for the growth of insurgency. Insecurity in Africa stems from internal crises that aim to undermine people’s safety and the African state’s coherence. Therefore, individual African states must develop more effective counterterrorism policies.

A nation’s political structure has a significant role in determining its security architecture.

For this to be accomplished, effective political leadership and corporate governance must be ingrained at the internal level of the African state. The administration of each African state must understand that defeating terrorism requires teamwork and must demonstrate the capacity and willingness to achieve victory. This is because if internal conflicts are permitted to persist and damage the political structure, it will pave the way for external forces to invade. African nations must fortify political institutions in their particular domains to achieve a change in the security architecture. Also, African governments must work together with other nations to implement counterinsurgency strategies. The African Union and regional organizations like ECOWAS must intervene to maintain Africa’s peace and security. African nations must cooperate on forward-thinking projects to reach a common goal.

The trajectories of political and economic progress have been significantly impacted by security issues brought on by internal conflict, civil wars, and terrorist acts. In light of the continent’s security issues and other difficulties, and to address the problems that are slowly destroying the continent, African political leaders must use the opportunity to restructure the continent’s democratic systems. The promises made by African leaders to draw up counterterrorism technology development plans must also be reaffirmed. Establishing strong democratic and political institutions in each African state is crucial to transforming Africa into a safe continent free from terrorist attacks and other types of danger. These institutions must be capable of using both the military and diplomacy to combat terrorism.

Lastly, the effectiveness of the actions and policies put in place by the individual governments of African countries will significantly impact the future trajectories of counterterrorism and security in the continent. For African nations to effectively battle terrorism and firmly establish peace and security throughout the continent, better political institutions must be built, alliances with states that are militarily stronger must be formed, and counterterrorism policies and actions must be well coordinated. African nations must build strong political leadership and corporate governance in the battle against terrorism to overcome the insecurity dilemma brought about by terrorists in the continent. Only then can the fight against terrorism in Africa be won.

The article is an excerpt from a keynote address at the International Conference on “Counterterrorism, Technology and Development in Africa”, 22 September 2022, Stellenbosch University, South Africa and Obuda University, Hungary.

Published by the good folks at The Elephant.
The Elephant is a platform for engaging citizens to reflect, re-member and re-envision their society by interrogating the past, the present, to fashion a future.

Follow us on Twitter.