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Does Academic Freedom Foster Peace in Africa?

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Abstract

Building on earlier literature regarding the role of scholars and academic freedom in shaping public attitudes, this study examines their impact on 'relational peace.' Using the Institute for Economics and Peace's Global Peace Index and the Varieties of Democracy Index on Academic Freedom, along with generalized least squares econometric techniques, we find that the level of academic freedom preceding a given period is a significant determinant of peace and the absence of violence. This result remains robust when tested on all African countries, as well as on African countries with high levels of factionalism, defined by the Factionalized Elites indicator in the Fragile States ranking of the Fund for Peace, and under various lag structures for academic freedom. A qualitative analysis of Cameroon, Kenya, and Zimbabwe highlights how differences in the space available for scholars influence their contributions to fostering peaceful relations within these societies.

1. Introduction

Wars and political instability restrict the space for academic work. Academic freedom is frequently one of the casualties in such conflicts. Numerous countries offer examples where ongoing clashes between rival political factions and their external supporters, or acts of politically motivated persecution, have silenced academics or forced them into exile (see Derbesh 2020). Abdul Bangura's analysis of the discourse on academic freedom in Africa shows that most attention is given to its violations connecting the concept negatively to political crises and militarization (Bangura 2020, 34). However, the relationship can also work in reverse: when academics are granted the freedom to act independently, they may contribute to preventing or resolving violent conflicts.

This paper aims to explore this relationship, the impact of academic freedom on peace. We hypothesize that scholars can influence both authorities and the public. For governments, scholars can offer innovative conflict resolution strategies, utilizing their greater freedom compared to political leaders. At the grassroots level, scholars can act as opinion leaders, promoting attitudes that reject violence (see Lederach 1997, 37–55). Conversely, the absence of academic freedom or scholars' submission to political pressures diminishes the potential for knowledge-driven conflict resolution, exacerbating societal divisions and intensifying violence.

Divisions, political differences, or partisanship do not inherently prevent peaceful relations within a society (Elkin 2004; Elstub 2008). What matters is the capacity of parties to cooperate without resorting to violence or dominance: 'cooperation is both the goal of peace and the process that sustains it' (Johnson, Johnson, and Tjosvold 2012, 15). Johanna Söderström, Malin Åkebo, and Anna Jarstad have introduced the concept of 'relational peace,' emphasizing the importance of trust between parties (2021). This underscores the importance of academic freedom. The dissemination of evidence and research findings, along with free and open debate and the acknowledgment of expert opinions, is essential for trust enabling informed, transparent decision-making (Bryden and Mittenzwei 2013). Relational peace is a particularly valuable concept to analyse the role of scholars in countries where communal identity-based conflicts intersect with political competition as is the case in much of Africa.

In our previous study, utilizing the Varieties of Democracy database (V-Dem), we demonstrated that academic freedom has contributed to democracy in Africa. High levels of academic freedom in the past were associated with executive accountability and a reduction in fraud, manipulation, and violence during elections. Higher education alone did not have this effect. We attribute this causality to an academic culture of excellence, upheld by impartial peer evaluation, which helps mitigate corruption within the educated elite and enhances the integrity of the electoral process. While skills and expertise are necessary, they are not sufficient on their own. Academics' acquiescence to authoritarian rule can be exploited to manipulate elections (Kratou and Laakso 2022, p1). Our findings are supported by Lars Pelke's study on the graduates' socialisation on democratic values. Using the data from the World Values Surveys, Pelke showed that high levels of academic freedom during university education support the graduates' democratic values and through that reduce the likelihood of autocratisation (Pelke 2023).

In this paper we dive deeper in the role of academic freedom in the African political landscape. With empirical tests, using generalized and ordinary least squares econometric technique we will show the relationship between academic freedom lagged by five, ten, fifteen and twenty years and

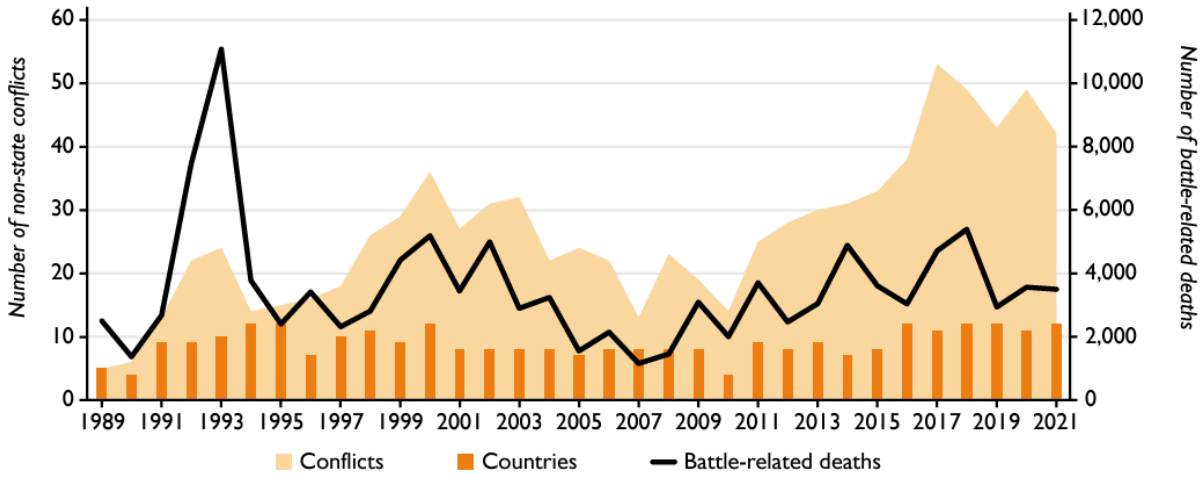
peace in Africa and for a comparison to global level. For the first analysis, we again use the V-Dem Academic Freedom Index (AF) (Spannagel and Kinzelbach 2022) and for peace the Global Peace Index (GPI) of the Institute for Economics and Peace ('Global Peace Index 2022: Measuring Peace in a Complex World' 2022). We will look in more detail at developments in countries divided along ethnic, racial, clan, or religious lines, where the likelihood of intense and exclusionary power struggles is very high. To trace these divisions we use the Factionalized Elites indicator of the Fragile States ranking of the Fund for Peace (Fragile States Index 2023 – Annual Report 2023).

To further understand the role and space available to scholars, we describe developments in three countries with high levels of factionalism but differing in their academic freedom and conflict trends: Cameroon, Kenya, and Zimbabwe. Our analysis will incorporate first-hand accounts from scholars in these countries, obtained through semi-structured interviews.

2. Why Focus on Peace in Africa?

Although the numbers of African countries involved in armed conflicts as well as the total of battle related deaths have remained relatively stable since 1990s, the increase of intra-state communal conflicts is remarkable (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Non-state conflicts, conflict countries and battle-related deaths in Africa



Source: Palik, Obermeier, and Rustad 2022, 21. The data is from the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) that provides the numbers of conflicts with at least 25 battle-related deaths per year as well as the numbers of conflict-affected countries, some of which have several conflicts at the same time.

Noteworthy is the correlation between this increase and the transitions to multi-party electoral systems in the early 1990s. In divided societies, multiparty competition has often intensified identity-driven conflicts. This observation is further supported by the frequent occurrence of electoral violence across the continent (Laakso 2020b; Mehler 2005, 29). Mary Kaldor introduced the concept of 'new wars' to analyse protracted armed conflicts in fragmented societies (Kaldor 2012). The political economy of these conflicts relies on 'greed' and revenue generated through the illegal trade of easily lootable primary commodities (Collier and Hoeffler 2004). However, greed, as such, cannot be regarded as the cause of intra-state conflicts in Africa, as suggested by Ratsimbaharison (2011). Similarly, political competition should not be seen as an inherent barrier to peace. What is crucial is the extent to which the diverse opinions of different parties are tolerated. Giovanni Sartori emphasizes societal trust through voluntary affiliations, as opposed to identity-based, exclusive, and clientelist forms of belonging. (Sartori 1997). Peace can be achieved through elite compacts, co-optation, or power-sharing; however, these arrangements may falter if they lack broader societal support. Grievances stemming from land disputes and socio-economic injustices and their connection to identity-based political mobilisation exacerbated by the concentration of power in the executive—often characteristic of African political systems—can easily escalate into violence (Laakso and Kariuki 2023). The heritage of armed liberation struggles prevailing in many African countries lowers the threshold to use violence further (Melber 2009). As the competition for power and financial opportunities extends from the central state level to the regional and local levels, so do the strategies of the competing elites resulting, for instance in violent secessionist conflicts (Englebert 2005).

As Ann-Sofie Isaksson and Arne Bigsten note:

> Politics relying on clientelism focuses on targeted transfers rather than projects of national interest. Not only is this likely to have significant distributional consequences, it could also discourage the development of a democratic system in which citizens vote for broad-based policy accountability rather than narrow personal gain, and where governments formulate development policies that place the long-term common good ahead of short-sighted narrow and local interests (Isaksson and Bigsten 2017, 626).

African scholars, operating outside political circles, can present strategies to promote policy accountability by leveraging research evidence and expertise—for example, on electoral systems and the importance of an independent judiciary (see Nkansah 2016). They can also collaborate with the media to ensure the dissemination of accurate information to the public (Paffenholz and Reychler 2005). Moreover, as educators and respected experts, scholars can shape public attitudes that condemn violence—a stance that, in accordance with Afrobarometer survey data, correlates with lower levels of violent behaviour (Linke, Schutte, and Buhaug 2015).

3. Data

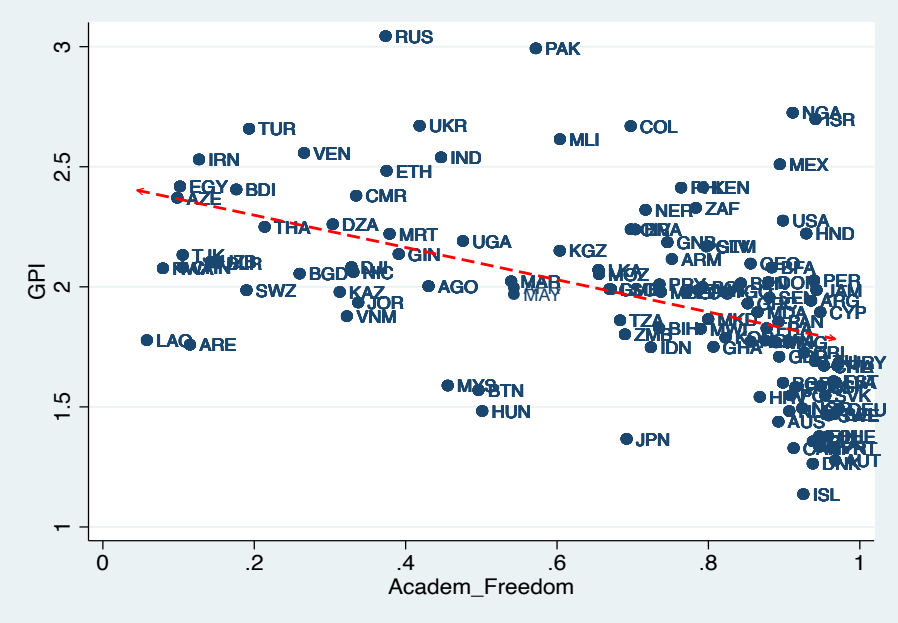
GPI uses 23 qualitative and quantitative measurements to assess societal safety and security, ongoing domestic and international conflicts, and levels of militarization, with scores ranging from the most peaceful value of 1 to 5. It evaluates a country's internal and external peacefulness, incorporating UCDP data (see Wallensteen 2011) and the Armed Conflict Location and Event Dataset (ACLED), which provides detailed sub-state analysis by disaggregating conflict information by location and actor (see Raleigh et al. 2010). Additional data sources include the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), Political Terror Scale, United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), World Prison Brief, and Stockholm International

Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) Arms Transfers Database, alongside qualitative indicators from Economist Intelligence Unit (EUI) country analysis teams ('Global Peace Index 2022: Measuring Peace in a Complex World' 2022). The GPI aligns closely with an agency-centric approach and the concept of relational peace, acting as a comprehensive proxy for evaluating the conditions and extent of peaceful relationships at the country level.

The V-Dem AF index is grounded in UNESCO's 1997 Recommendation concerning the Status of Higher-Education Teaching Personnel ('IUPsyS — United Nations Activities' 1998). Beyond safeguarding the freedom of researchers, teachers, and students to select research topics and methods, collect materials, and analyse and publish findings, the aggregated expert-coded measure also includes university autonomy and campus integrity (Spannagel and Kinzelbach 2022; Coppedge et al. 2024). Academic freedom thus encompasses the protection and appreciation of scientific knowledge production and expertise in society—not just the freedom to participate in political discussions (Post 2012). Consequently, academic freedom is indispensable for informed decision-making, in addition to ensuring the quality of higher education and research (Altbach 2001; Grimm and Saliba 2017).

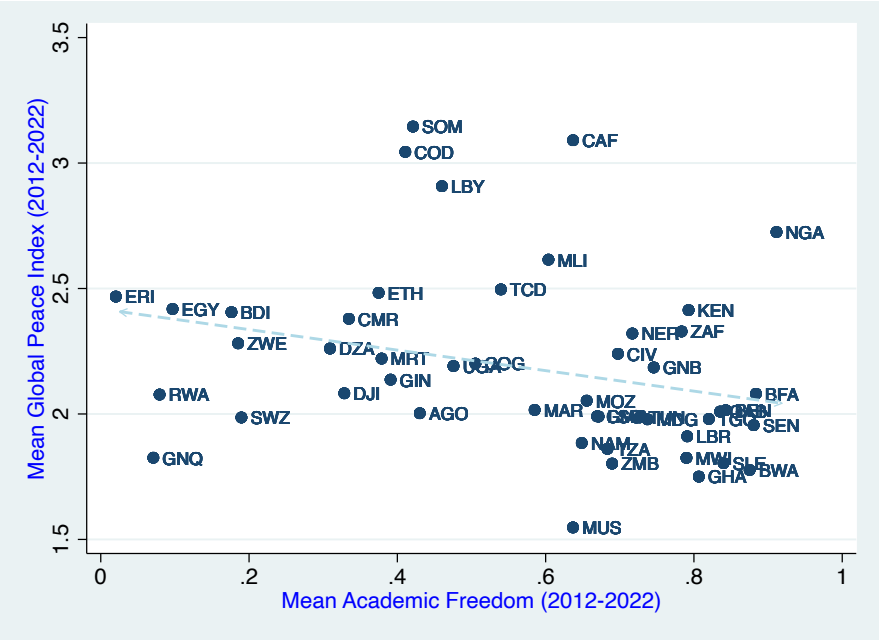
Globally, there is a clear correlation between AF and low GPI values (Figure 2). However, since high-income, industrialized countries tend to have higher levels of academic freedom compared to low-income countries (Altbach 2001, 215; Berggren and Bjørnskov 2022, 215), and poverty appears to increase the risk of conflicts (Jakobsen, De Soysa, and Jakobsen 2013), focusing on Africa—where countries share similarities in these aspects—is useful. As shown in Figure 3, the correlation between AF and GPI is also evident in Africa (Figure 3).

Figure 2. Scatter plot between academic freedom and peace (mean values 2012-2022)



Source: Authors own work.

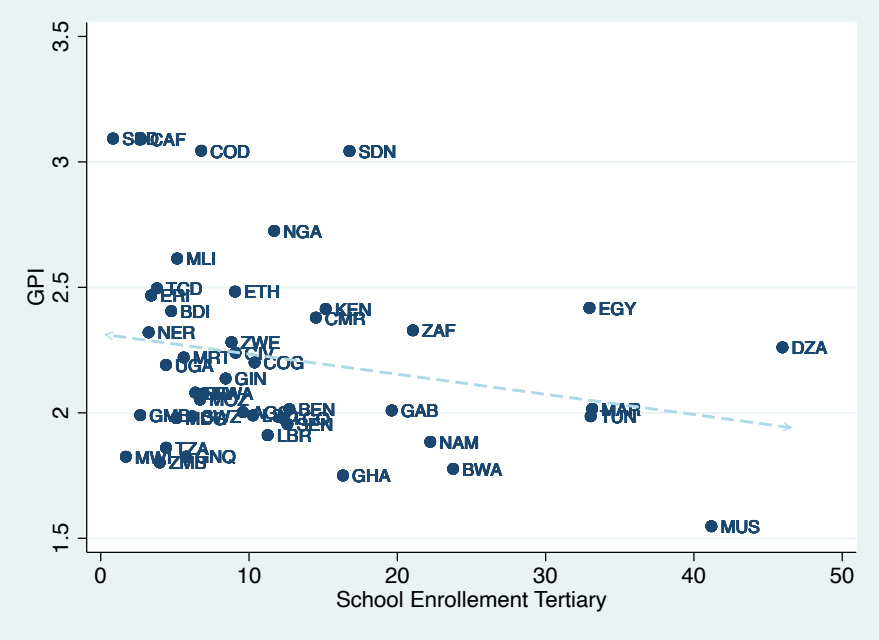
Figure 3. Scatter plot between academic freedom and peace in Africa



Source: Authors own work.

An obvious indicator of interest is higher education. We also examined the relationship between the GPI and tertiary school enrolment, using mean values from the World Development Indicators data ('WDI, World Bank' 2024). Figure 4 reveals a negative correlation; however, when compared to Figure 3, it becomes evident that levels of higher education and academic freedom are not identical.

Figure 4. Scatter plot between Tertiary enrolment and peace in Africa (2012-2022)



Source: Authors own work.

The Factionalized Elites indicator (C2) from the Cohesion indicator in the Fragile States Index identifies countries where the risk of conflict is high due to internal divisions. Although the limitations of cross-country data on sub-national identities are well-documented (Marquardt and Herrera 2015; Ferreira 2021), the C2's emphasis on elite-level divisions enhances its credibility as a robust and insightful measure. This indicator evaluates the fragmentation of state institutions along religious, ethnic, clan, racial, or class lines. It records exclusive political rhetoric related to nationalism, xenophobia, or ethnic cleansing, as well as the intensity of power struggles and representation in leadership, the military, and the judiciary. Additionally, it assesses the concentration of wealth ('Methodology | Fragile States Index' 2023, 6–7). The C2 ranges from 0 to a maximum of 10. Between 2012 and 2022, the median C2 value for African countries was 7.75. From this, we derived a sample of 26 African multi-party electoral systems with scores above the median (Appendix).

4. Model

Our theory suggests that academic freedom fosters peaceful relations within divided societies. By providing conflict resolution expertise and reinforcing cross-cutting cleavages and societal loyalties, academics can mitigate and prevent violence between factions—provided they have the freedom to do so. In contrast, limited academic freedom risks the instrumentalisation of expertise to advance narrow factional elite interests, thereby deepening exclusive divisions and heightening the likelihood of violent conflict.

Our model equation and the econometric techniques to test the hypothesis that high levels of AF are associated with low levels of GPI build on our previous study of the relationship between AF

and V-Dem indicators of democracy. Recognizing that the effects of AF are likely to manifest with a delay (Kratou and Laakso 2022), we estimate a dynamic model with a five-year lag structure:

$$GPI_{it} = \alpha + \beta_1 AF_{it-5} + \beta_2 Controls_{it} + \mu_i + \sigma_t + \varepsilon \qquad \text{Eq.1}$$

GPI comprises 99.7 per cent of the world's population. AF, the vital variable in the model, is lagged by five years. According to our hypothesis, β_1 is expected to have a negative sign. We control for the GDP per capita growth rate and education level, using tertiary school enrolment as a proxy ('WDI, World Bank' 2024). Additionally, we account for the cost of living as a determinant of a peaceful environment by including the inflation rate, measured by the GDP deflator.

We first apply the generalized least squares estimation technique, which adjusts for both country-specific and time-specific unobserved disturbances. This method estimates the effects within countries over time, rather than between countries, while controlling for variation across countries (Imai and Kim 2019).

Our panel data covers the years 2012 to 2022 first with a global sample of 162 countries selected based on the availability of GPI and World Bank data, then all African countries and African countries that implement multi-party electoral competition in the context of high levels of fractionalised elite, and thus a higher risk of violent conflict.

5. Findings

Our results indicate that AF lagged by five years, is associated with a negative and significant coefficient at the 5% level (column 1, Table 1). This suggests that the freedom of scholars to conduct their work in the past contributes to a higher level of peace in countries with varying income and development levels. The coefficient becomes more significant when we control for education, growth, and inflation. That the tertiary education control variable is significant and associated with the expected negative sign corroborates the findings of Okafor, Nwogu, and Osuagwu (2018, p 7) on the positive effect of language education for peace and security.

Table 1. The Impact of Preceding Levels of Academic Freedom on Peace at the Global Level

Dependent variable: GPI	1	2	3	4
AF (five years lag)	-0.297**	-0.340***	-0.325***	-0.339***

	(-2.098)	(-3.021)	(-2.886)	(-3.039)
school enrolment tertiary		-0.00276***	-0.00273**	-0.00306***
		(-2.641)	(-2.425)	(-2.644)
LogInflation			0.00536	
			(1.091)	
GDP Growth (log)				0.00691
				(1.105)
Constant	2.222***	2.329***	2.306***	2.308***
	(22.68)	(32.49)	(34.15)	(34.06)
Countries	162	146	142	140
Observations	1.778	1.212	1.088	916

Note: ***, ** and * denote significance at, respectively, the 1, 5 and 10% levels. Robust-t-statistics are in parenthesis.

The result persists in Africa (columns 3 and 4, Table 2), including the 26 multi-party electoral systems with the Factionalized Elites indicator (C2) above the median African value (column 5), further supporting our hypothesis. In other words, there is evidence of causality, based on the delayed impact of AF at both the global level and in Africa. To examine the robustness of our results, we test our hypothesis using the ordinary least squares and test different lag structures for academic freedom (5-year; 10-year; 15-year and 20-year lag). Results are presented in table 3 and reveal a more sizeable and significant coefficient related to the four AF lag structures. These results align with the initial ones and with our developed hypothesis.

Table 2. The Impact of Preceding Levels of Academic Freedom on Peace in Africa

Dependent variable: GPI	1	2	3	4	5
					High fractionalized elite
AF (five years lag)	-0.149	-0.136	-0.233*	-0.256**	-0.234**
	(-1.155)	(-1.391)	(-1.910)	(-2.394)	(-2.252)
school enrolment tertiary	-0.000790	-0.00172	-0.00227	-0.00352*	-0.00279
	(-0.209)	(-0.663)	(-0.775)	(-1.916)	(-1.403)
LogInflation		-0.00836		-0.0238**	-0.0345***
		(-0.883)		(-2.169)	(-3.054)
GDP Growth (log)			-0.00483	-0.00994	-0.00660
			(-0.477)	(-0.956)	(-0.558)
Constant	2.279***	2.271***	2.309***	2.379***	2.415***
	(17.89)	(23.55)	(19.68)	(24.11)	(24.59)
Countries	43	41	39	39	26
Observations	290	260	214	194	137

Note: ***, ** and * denote significance at, respectively, the 1, 5 and 10% levels. Robust-t-statistics are in parenthesis.

Table 3. Academic Freedom and Peace in Africa (robustness checks)

Dependent variable: GPI	1	2	3	4

	AF (five years lag)	AF (ten years lag)	AF (fifteen years lag)	AF (twenty years lag)
Academic freedom (AF)	-0.449***	-0.403***	-0.462***	-0.522***
	(-5.887)	(-5.259)	(-6.070)	(-6.644)
School enrolment tertiary	-0.00556***	-0.00571***	-0.00570***	-0.00557***
	(-3.686)	(-3.722)	(-3.782)	(-3.767)
LogInflation	-0.0175	-0.0133	-0.00711	-0.00475
	(-1.037)	(-0.779)	(-0.480)	(-0.295)
GDP Growth (log)	-0.00613	-0.00261	-0.00164	-0.00223
	(-0.347)	(-0.146)	(-0.0915)	(-0.130)
Constant	2.469***	2.430***	2.443***	2.451***
	(37.73)	(37.47)	(43.57)	(42.21)
Countries	39	39	39	39
Observations	198	198	198	198

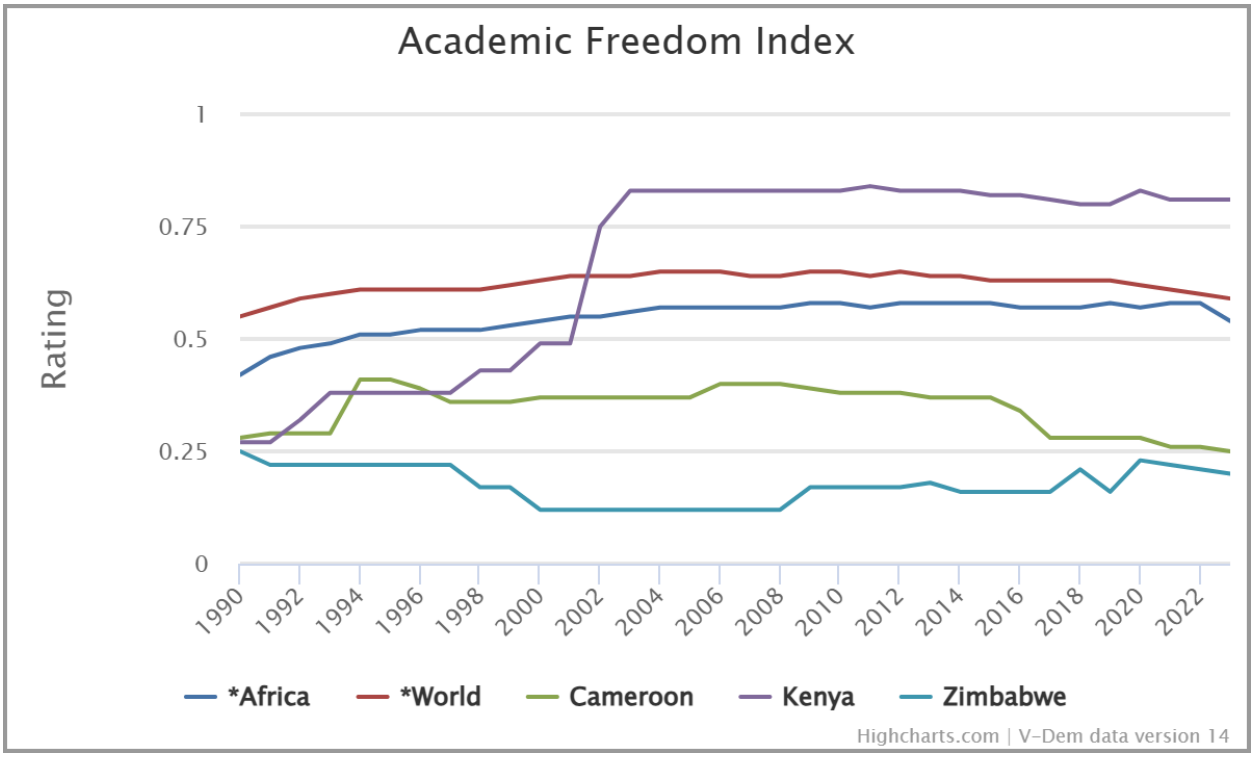
6. Case studies

Developments in Cameroon, Kenya, and Zimbabwe showing high levels of C2 throughout the decade (respective averages of 9.3, 9.9, and 9.0) shed light on the relationship between academic freedom and peace further. All these countries are affected by internal conflicts. In the GPI ranking of 2024 from the most to least peaceful country Zimbabwe was in a position of 121, Kenya 122 and Cameroon 137 ('Global Peace Index 2024: Measuring Peace in a Complex World' 2024, 8–9).

The countries, however, differ in their AF levels and trends over time: Cameroon and Zimbabwe being below the African average and Kenya above (Figure 5). Kwadwo Appiagyei-Atua, Klaus D. Beiter, and Terence Karran in their survey of the protection of academic freedom in the legislation and in the statutes and ordinances of public universities in Africa in 2016, classified Kenya as 'free', Zimbabwe 'partly free' and Cameroon 'not free' (Appiagyei-Atua, Beiter, and Karran 2016, 109–10).

In exploring their development in depth, we have drawn on semi-structured, anonymised interviews conducted between 2019 and 2024 at the University of Yaoundé I, University of Yaoundé II, University of Nairobi, and University of Zimbabwe. We interviewed scholars, identified through their profiles on university websites as social scientists specialising in political participation or social and economic divisions and equality, and asked about their freedom to conduct research and their ability to express views and disseminate knowledge on identity-based divisions and cooperation between different groups. The interviewees were free to reference conflicts and factionalism, which allowed us to identify the meanings they attributed to their potential to foster relational peace.

Figure 5. Trends of Academic Freedom in Cameroon, Kenya and Zimbabwe



Source: (Coppedge et al. 2024).

6.1. Cameroon

At independence Cameroon was a federal state, built on the colonial heritage of the French Cameroon and the anglophone British Southern Cameroon, but evolved into a one-party unitary state in the 1970s. In early 1990s the country re-introduced multi-party political system along with most of its neighbours. This transition, however, did not shaken the position of President Paul Biya. After the transition, the first opposition party was established in the anglophone region with a strong support of university students. Mass demonstrations demanding for further democratic reforms flollowed. At the campus of the leading francophone public university, the University of Yaoundé, these led to confrontations between the government forces and students. One of the government responses to the discontents of the academia was the establishment of new universities. University of Buea became the first English language public university in 1992. It evolved from a university center founded in 1985 (Njeuma et al. 1999). The second English university was established in 2011 in Bamenda. These moves expanded English language education, which had been one of the main demands of the anglophone academics and students. Perceptions of the imbalance between English and French education systems and lack of English language public service remained however.

By 2017, the crisis escalated into an armed conflict between the government forces and anglophone militias fighting for secession of the western regions under the name of Ambazonia. The harsh approach of the government raised criticism among the academia. Stony Brook University Professor Patrice Nganang, citizen of both Cameroon and United States, wrote an article condemning the government (Nganang 2017). He was arrested and then deported from the country.

Universities have no autonomy (Appiagyei-Atua, Beiter, and Karran 2016, 105, 110). The president appoints their whole leadership: board chairmen, rectors and vice-rectors in the francophone universities and vice-chancellors and pro-chancellors in the anglophone universities as well as deans and heads of departments. According to Piet Konings and Francis Nyamnjoh, these nominations have been part of the government's divide and rule tactics (Konings and Nyamnjoh 1997, 225). Creation of new regional universities created also new leadership posts expanding the power base of the president. A World Bank commissioned evaluation of the university sector even stated: 'Various heads of institutions have demonstrated extremely limited management skills. The effects of this have been so profound in some cases that the institutions concerned have been basically derailed from their main missions' (Njeuma et al. 1999, 14).

According to one scholar we interviewed 'the state does not control the university. It is not that they are controlling the curricula, they are controlling people.' And: 'If you are appointed by someone you do what he wants, not what you want.' 'If you are in a critical position, if you write on controversial topics and are critical to the government, then the mechanism of oppression is that you will not advance within the academic system.'

It is not rare for academic staff to have careers in the ministries or other government agencies or the ruling party aside of their university posts (Konings 2004). However, very few did research on it: 'You cannot decide to do a study on the work of the government, and expect the doors to open easily, nor a study of the functioning of the prime minister. These are taboo subjects.' Fred Eboko and Patrick Awondo described the pressure to preserve the status quo in Cameroon by the concept of 'stationary state' (Eboko and Awondo 2018, XXII).

'There is politics everywhere. Everywhere. And in everything you do…I do not see any sector where you are out of politics. Even teaching.' In the words of a younger scholar 'People live in danger and work in danger'. And: 'If you start saying things against the government you will face big challenges. They can kill you.' Violence was substantiated by independence struggle: 'It is the heritage from the nationalist movement, the fight for independence. To make sure that you are not challenging the government.' Particular concern was the politicisation of ethnicity and tension between ethnic groups, which was exacerbated in the media and extended into universities: 'This is one of the things that are killing us.' 'Today, as soon as you give your opinion, they say "he's from that region". I do not like to talk about this, because I think it is a primitive debate, coming to question a scholar about his ethnic belonging.'

6.2. Kenya

The post-Cold War wave of democratization brought Kenya to reinstate the freedom to form political parties. Elections in 1992 and 1997, that were won by the then ruling party Kenya African

National Union (KANU), were marred with violence. For the 2002 elections, the opposition formed a winning National Rainbow Coalition (NARC), which however collapsed to internal disputes before the 2007 elections. In 2007, violent conflicts erupted once more, leading to proceedings before the International Criminal Court (ICC). The political rivals, Uhuru Kenyatta and William Ruto, were formally charged with crimes against humanity for their alleged roles in orchestrating the violence (Wamai 2014). What followed was a power sharing arrangement between 'the big men', this time in the name of the Grand Coalition Government. Important was a constitutional reform decentralising the government in order to accommodate the ethno-regional diversity of the nation. In 2018 the winner of the 2017 elections Uhuru Kenyatta, and opposition leader Raila Odinga reached a political agreement popularly known as 'the handshake' (Cheeseman et al. 2019).

Although the reinstallation of multipartyism had already increased the opportunities of academics to take part in political discussions, it was after the regime change of 2002 that many felt that they could openly criticise the government. Noteworthy was the stipulation of university autonomy in the University Act (2012):

> A University, in performing its functions shall— (a) have the right and responsibility to preserve and promote the traditional principles of academic freedom in the conduct of its internal and external affairs; … (2) A member of the academic staff of a university shall have the freedom, within the law, in the member's teaching, research and any other activities either in or outside the university, to question and test received wisdom, to put forward new ideas and to state opinions, and shall not be disadvantaged, or subject to less favourable treatment by the university, for the exercise of that freedom (quoted in Appiagyei-Atua, Beiter, and Karran 2016, 96).

Party political competition, however, has also created tensions in the universities. Like in Cameroon, new regional universities have been established since 1990s. While balancing government powers and resources between the regions and their elites, they have also instigated accusations of bias and favouritism. Appointments of university management and academic staff are claimed to be based more on loyalties to the regional elites and ethnicity than academic merits (Sifuna 2012).

Such accusations were repeated in our interviews with Kenyan academics. We were told that the imperative to get opportunities and resources from the government meant that ethnic affiliation 'overflows into the academic.' 'It's a serious problem, not to mention the endemic corruption, because there is a lot of looting at the universities'. According to one scholar: 'Kenya is divided along ethnic lines, even appointments at universities are again contingent upon one's ethnic affiliation. That does not create a very conducive academic environment. I know of cases where even progression does not depend on merit.' Another interviewee explained: 'the university has a new vice chancellor and the moment he went to office he has decided to bring all his tribesmen around him. The guy who was there before did the same, and the guy who was there before him did the same. This is something that has multiplied. You can apply it to every other institution.' And: 'Even students' leaders' elections are determined along those ethnic lines. It worries me. What does it do in terms of bringing about national cohesion?'

In spite of some scholars being 'co-opted', we were told that there was also space for 'public intellectuals' who were able to present independent research results and their expert views and

advice to the government without being labelled partial. Academics had contributed to the reform of the constitution 'by providing research support, being engaged in public speaking events, to give commentaries'. The scholars mentioned active participation in governmental commissions on peace building, for example on women and peace to mainstream UN Security Council resolution 1325 in Kenya. Scholars felt they had full freedom to conduct research on violent conflicts in Kenya and neighbouring regions, as well as to supervise their students in such research. Examples were theses on Al-Shabaab, work on a peace process between two ethnic groups and the evaluation of traditional methods for countering violent extremism.

6.3. Zimbabwe

Unlike most African countries, Zimbabwe has maintained its multi-party system since gaining independence in 1980 from the minority rule of Southern Rhodesia. However, throughout this period, the regime in power has been led by a single party, the Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU). Opposition parties have faced violent suppression by the regime (Laakso 2003). Following the 2008 elections, and with the mediation of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and South African President Thabo Mbeki, a Government of National Unity was formed in 2009 (Welz 2010). However, by the 2013 elections, the opposition had once again become divided. Internal disputes have affected also the ruling ZANU. In 2017 a bloodless coup forced Robert Mugabe to step down from presidentship and his deputy, Emmerson Mnangagwa, with the support of the army, took over (Tendi 2020).

Academics, many of whom had been actively involved in the liberation struggle and had returned from exile at independence, defended the multi-party system against the government plans to establish a formal one-party state in early 1990s. They also mobilised against increasing government control of the university management (Cheater 1991, 200–203) The nomination of Vice Chancellors has been subject to ministerial approval, but unlike in Cameroon, university autonomy prevails at the lower levels of management. The university community has the right to elect representatives to the governing bodies within the university. Much depends on the Vice-Chancellors themselves – how devoted they are to act as the representatives of the academia vis-à-vis the regime.

What has been peculiar for Zimbabwean academia has been its close relation to the regime – both as supporters and critics. Several scholars there have played both roles. This can be explained by the prolonged liberation struggle that was participated by many intellectuals who were influential still in the first decades of the 2000s. Zimbabwean education sector, university included, was also well developed and supportive to research excellence during the 1980s and 1990s. Research output on various issues related to communal conflicts like those over resources like environment, water and land has been noteworthy. This has implied also a direct link for the faculty to government authorities: 'We have, actually, direct access. You can pick up a phone and talk to somebody that you know directly,' one of the scholars we interviewed stated.

However, with the economic decline, working conditions at universities deteriorated, including resources, infrastructure, teaching workloads due to large class sizes, and inflation-eroded salaries. In 2019, for instance, university workers' committees issued a public statement that their salaries were no longer enough for them to afford transport to work. The response of authorities has been harsh. According to one scholar, the university management advised them not to discuss salaries, instead they should raise income from external sources. And they were told by a government minister: 'you can resign and go'. And indeed, one of the consequences has been a mass exodus of the academic staff and graduates as well.

At the University of Zimbabwe, the management was pushing through reforms even at the level of the disciplines in order to fulfil the government's aspirations to promote 'innovations and industrialization' against the wishes of the staff (Kufakurinani 2022). 'The Vice-Chancellor comes from the same village as the minister', we were told. Thus, the biggest constraint for academic freedom in Zimbabwe has not been direct pressure from the government, but lack of support. The mood among the academics was deep frustration. One scholar testified: 'I remember some media guys came to our department, tried to interview from office to office. Nobody was interested. Because people think, what is the point. Our guys from the department are no longer interested.'

7. Conclusions

Academic freedom is crucial for scholars to engage actively in societal roles. It supports cooperation among diverse groups and promotes pluralism, both of which are essential for relational peace, especially in divided societies, as highlighted in the literature. To investigate this, we developed a model to test the hypothesis that academic freedom contributes to peace.

Our study focused on Africa, a continent significantly affected by violent conflicts throughout the 2000s. For comparison, we also analysed a global dataset comprising 162 countries and a subset of 26 African nations characterised by high levels of social division, particularly elite factionalism.

We observed a positive correlation between current levels academic freedom and peace. To explore causality, we examined the relationship between peace and a five-year lag in academic freedom. This relationship was positively correlated in the broader dataset and in the African sample also in countries with high levels of elite factionalism.

A qualitative analysis of Cameroon, Kenya and Zimbabwe sheds light on the varied roles academia plays in divided societies affected by or threatened with violent conflict. In Cameroon, the academic sphere has been significantly constrained, with scholars often self-censoring, avoiding criticism of the government, and aligning with the regime to safeguard their careers. In contrast, Kenyan academics have experienced greater freedom to engage in public discourse, a situation appreciated in light of the restrictive policies of previous regimes. However, ethno-regional politics, particularly in university appointments, have posed challenges to academic meritocracy, especially in regional institutions. In Zimbabwe, economic hardships have led to increasing frustration among academics, reducing their willingness to participate in political discussions.

By emphasizing the role of academia in fostering cross-cutting cleavages, mitigating the risk of violent confrontation, and promoting cooperation, our findings contribute to the theory of relational peace. Policy implications suggest that enhancing academic freedom and supporting educational institutions can play a crucial role in promoting long-term peace and preventing violence. Governments should invest in safeguarding academic freedom, ensuring that universities remain spaces for critical dialogue, and fostering environments that enable scholars to contribute to conflict resolution and social cohesion.

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Appendix

African countries with high levels of elite factionalism

Country code	Country name
BDI	Burundi
CAF	Central African Republic
CIV	Cote d'Ivoire
CMR	Cameroon
COD	Democratic Republic of the Congo
EGY	Egypt
ETH	Ethiopia
GIN	Guinea
GNB	Guinea Bissau
GNQ	Equatorial Guinea
KEN	Kenya
LBR	Liberia
LBY	Libya
MRT	Mauritania
MWI	Malawi
NER	Niger
NGA	Nigeria
RWA	Rwanda
SDN	Sudan
SLE	Sierra Leone
SOM	Somalia
SSD	South Sudan
TCD	Chad
TUN	Tunisia
UGA	Uganda
ZWE	Zimbabwe