The focus on war and anecdotal evidence hides real progress towards more stable and open political systems in Africa.

This is demonstrated by a new indicator based on a systematic screening of political events and decisions over the last ten years.

The diagnosis for 2004 and 2005 is more positive than may have been thought.
An Early Warning Indicator

The political indicators are based on information gleaned from the French weekly *Marchés Tropicaux et Méditerranéens*. They refer to:

1) **Political troubles**: occurrence of strikes, demonstrations, violence and coups d’État;
2) **Softening of the political regime**: releases of political prisoners, measures in favour of human rights, decisions promoting democracy, lifting of bans on demonstrations and public debate;
3) **Hardening of the political regime**: incarcerations of opponents, measures threatening democracy such as dissolution of political parties, violence perpetuated by police and banning of demonstrations or public debates.

For the specialists, the events were computed as statistical variables, taking both into account their occurrence and intensity. A principal component analysis was then used to determine the set of relevant weights attributed to each variable within the synthetic indexes.

The resulting data covers 30 African countries in five African sub-regions gathered on a weekly basis from January 1996 to December 2005. The objective is not to address the issue of conflicts in countries that are already affected, but to offer early warning and risk indicators for countries that are still relatively stable. As such, none of the countries covered is in a situation of open war, although one or two might drift towards such a situation. The regular monitoring of the AEO political indicators is also helpful in tracking the dynamics of political responses to political instability and their implications for economic performance.

The *African Economic Outlook*’s close monitoring of political activity did not produce any evidence of contagious effects of political instability in Western and Southern Africa. Despite mounting tensions in Côte d’Ivoire and the deterioration of the political stance in Zimbabwe, neighbouring countries have resisted well and continued as in Mali, their progress towards stability and democracy.

In other cases, however, tensions ignored borders. War remains the strongest stress and threat to democracy and human rights in Africa. Continuous fighting in the east of DRC is endangering the country’s transition to peace. Tensions between Ethiopia and Eritrea resurfaced in 2005 and conflicts in Northern Uganda and Northern Kenya continue. Chad has been severely affected by the ongoing Darfur crisis in Western Sudan and the large number of refugees crossing the border.

Instead of the often chaotic and anecdotal “analysis” of African politics, the *African Economic Outlook* political indicator offers a sound basis for forecasting the near future political health of countries. The diagnosis that emerges from 2004 and 2005 is on balance far more positive than may previously have been thought.