Fictional States & Atomized Public Spheres: A Non-Western Approach to Fragility

William Reno

Abstract: This essay explains why political order in some places gives way to especially persistent conflict and prolonged state institutional collapse. State failure is rooted in decades of personalist rule, as leaders have sought to fragment and disorganize institutions and social groups that they thought would be possible bases of opposition. This problem was considered particular to sub-Saharan Africa, but now parts of the Middle East and Central Asia exhibit this connection between a particular type of authoritarian rule and state failure. State failure in these countries produces multisided warfare that reflects the fragmentation upon which prewar regimes relied for their protection. Policy-makers are thus faced with the dilemma of propping up personalist regimes that present themselves as bulwarks against disorder at the same time that their domestic strategies of governance play a central role in creating the conditions of protracted multisided warfare in the event that they fail.

WILLIAM RENO is Professor of Political Science and Director of the Program of African Studies at Northwestern University. He is the author of *Warfare in Independent Africa* (2011), *Warlord Politics and African States* (1998), and *Corruption and State Politics in Sierra Leone* (1995).

Fifty years ago, many experts believed that countries like Liberia, Somalia, and the Congo faced promising futures. A World Bank mission sent to assess Liberia's economic record reported: "The Liberia we found was strikingly different from that of only a dozen years ago. Development is now widespread and there is a genuine commitment to it on the part of the government."[1] Somalia's Supreme Revolutionary Council, installed in a 1969 coup, impressed an experienced observer who found extensive infrastructure development and improved state service provision. "The most important thing to note about the new military regime is that it appears to be honest and public spirited," he advised.[2] One scholar praised the Congo's rapid development and newfound political stability. "The Mobutu regime's emphasis on economic rationality has produced positive results," he wrote. "Since the enactment of the 1967 plan for monetary stabilization, the Congo seems to have entered a period of unprecedented prosperity."[3]

© 2017 by the American Academy of Arts & Sciences
doi:10.1162/DAED_a_00465

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/daed/article-pdf/146/4/139/1831117/daed_a_00465.pdf by guest on 30 September 2022

Fifty years on, the situation in these countries is bleak. Liberia's public health system collapsed in the face of the 2014 Ebola epidemic, despite more than a decade of intensive international assistance that followed the country's fourteen-year civil war. Systemic failure in Liberia should not be confused with disorganized and corrupt administration. For example, Nigeria's public health service demonstrated the sort of capacity to participate in the shared global processes that Paul Wise and Michele Barry identify as critical for dealing with pandemic threats.[4] The service was able to limit the virus's spread to nineteen confirmed cases (the first being a Liberian diplomat fleeing the epidemic in his home country), despite the government's overall poor reputation for inefficiency and corruption.[5] Somalia, perhaps Africa's most ethnically homogenous country, has not had an effective central government since 1991. The Fund for Peace's Fragile States Index (previously the Failed States Index) labeled Somalia the world's most failed state for seven of its twelve rankings from 2005 to 2016.[6] The Congo, host to the world's largest peacekeeping mission after a deal in 2002 that was supposed to end a six-year civil war, was described as exercising "minimal central government control over large parts of the national territory, poor transportation and electricity infrastructure, challenging terrain, and protracted local conflicts."[7]

The conflicts that accompany these collapses of state administration do not fit classic twentieth-century conceptions of rebel wars in which rebels devote considerable attention and resources to building a "liberated zone" controlled by their alternative government while they fight their way from the periphery of the country to the capital. These three failed states and a growing list of others would seem to be easy targets for rebels who wanted to establish their own zones of governance. At least it seems that it would not be difficult for rebels to push aside and out-govern the fragmented and weak incumbent regimes. But actually, the condition of state failure produces a distinct type of persistent warfare in which many armed groups fight one another, focusing more on controlling social and commercial networks than on just ruling particular territories. The armies of these failed states dissolve into militias that behave very much like the fragmented rebel forces. Usually there is a prominent role for roving armed groups that plunder resources. Various external nonstate actors, including in illicit commercial networks, play important roles in the strategies of competing armed groups. Civilians are exposed to violence from these multiple sources, usually resulting in mass displacement.

This essay explains how and why political order in some places gives way to especially persistent conflict and prolonged state institutional collapse. This explanation focuses on the domestic factors that lead some states to break down. Breakdown is rooted in decades of personalist rule and the failure of mid-twentieth-century state-building projects, long considered particular to sub-Saharan Africa. Developments in parts of the Middle East and Central Asia, however, show that this connection between a particular type of authoritarian rule and state failure that produces a particular type of warfare are not exclusive to Africa. These conflicts are outgrowths of the failure of high-modernist state-building projects as rulers turned away from the earlier institutional bases of political order, relying instead on personalist networks that would play critical roles in the character of the warfare to come.

Most rulers, particularly those governing divided populations with legacies of political violence, readily understand the simple paradox of civil-military relations. They realize that creating an armed force

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/daed/article-pdf/146/4/139/1831117/daed_a_00465.pdf by guest on 30 September 2022

protects against outside armed challenges, but that the ambitions of the members of this armed force also represent a threat.[8] Through the second half of the twentieth century, rulers of independent states in sub-Saharan Africa experienced the realities of this risk. Between 1956 and 2001, all but six of the region's forty-eight countries had experienced military interventions into politics. Successful coups occurred in thirty countries (62.5 percent of the total), and eighteen (37.5 percent) experienced multiple successful coups.[9] Economist Paul Collier has noted that coups tend to legitimate further coups, and that "societies can collapse into political black holes of repeated regime change generated from within the army."[10] Since coups, whether successful or not, often result in the death of the incumbent leader, this risk tends to be taken seriously indeed.

Prudent rulers recognize that their own survival might require them to undermine the formal institutions of the military that they also need for protection. This fear of the ambitions of skillful subordinates may extend to other state institutions, particularly ones that are critical to providing services to citizens. Determined politicians and civil servants might use these resources to build their own powerbases from which to launch challenges against the incumbent leadership. In short, the state institutions that the ruler requires to further the process of what one used to call modernization can become the most immediate threats to the ruler's political and even physical survival. Some rulers ignored or minimized this risk, preferring instead to focus on building state capacities in a bet that efficient state institutions and growing prosperity would translate into popular legitimacy soon enough to protect the regime. But the shock of a coup or uprising that nearly topples the regime often marks a decisive shift from building state institutions to undermining them. One such critical juncture occurred in Somalia in 1978 after the country's president survived a coup attempt among officers embittered by the Somali army's defeat in a failed irredentist effort to unite all ethnic Somalis in a single state. The president cast aside the pretenses of a socialist-inspired development project and a strong army that would unite all Somalis, doubling down instead on building patronage networks that he would pit against each other as they competed for his favor.

Bonds of dependence via personal or family ties and shady business offer rulers less risky means to manage the ambitions of military officers, state officials, and other important individuals. State institutions are still needed, but more as a façade to draw in foreign aid, loans, and the support of diplomatic partners, and as platforms to launch and shield insider deals, as Stephen Biddle observes in his essay in this volume.[11] Skillful manipulation of these prerogatives of state sovereignty generates the resources that the ruler needs to buy the support of those whose cooperation is necessary, such as individuals who control resources in their own right or who have powerbases within their own communities. The status as leader of a sovereign state gives the ruler the capacity to enforce laws selectively, to label those who fall out of favor as corrupt and subject them to prosecution while shielding those who were more favored from prosecution. Governments that are run in this manner can become a focus of concern from foreign security officials, such as when rulers go so far as to provide international criminals with passports and shield financial transactions. This can allow them to garner more resources and extend control of economic opportunities to include those in the illicit realm in an effort to limit the options and increase the dependence of political clients.

By the 1980s, Liberia's system of personalist rule had become the center of

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/daed/article-pdf/146/4/139/1831117/daed_a_00465.pdf by guest on 30 September 2022

a crime-conflict international disorder nexus of the sort described in Vanda Felbab-Brown's contribution to this volume.[12] The distinctions between those who were state officials and those who were members of criminal syndicates were becoming blurred. In a report of a task force set up in 1985 to recover arrears of $150 million owed to government corporations, investigators found that most of the debtors were government officials, including two heads of then-President Samuel Doe's security services.[13] Some U.S. government officials concluded that Liberia's entire system of governance rested on a dense system of misappropriated funds, insider scams, and illicit commercial activity under the protection of the country's political leaders, up to and including the president.[14] Even after a massive internationally backed reconstruction program following the country's 1989 – 2003 civil war, UN investigators pointed to a growing problem of cocaine and heroin trafficking through Liberia. In 2014, they reported that "a considerable number of those individuals involved in this trafficking as couriers were former combatants and currently serving personnel of the military and police forces."[15] Reports that South American traffickers have used Liberia as a transit point and tried to bribe Liberian officials suggest that these international criminal syndicates viewed corrupt politicians in Liberia as potential partners.[16]

This exercise of power behind the façade of formal state institutions plays a significant role in shaping the distinctive character of fragmented patterns of violent competition in failed states. Individuals who hold high offices, from the president downward, are often involved in these networks of patronage that are connected to underhand deals and illicit commercial activities. These networks of patronage serve to foreclose cooperation among members of the country's elite, their dependence and insecurity forcing them instead to compete among one another for presidential favor. This system of governance through the manipulation of an alternate noninstitutional realm of personal networks and tight control over other people's access to economic opportunities is terrible for the overall economy and commonly attracts widespread popular disdain. But this system works to maintain a sullen political stability so long as the ruler asserts tight personal discretion over access to these networks.

On occasion, this system of personal control breaks down, as in a coup d'état in Guinea-Bissau in 2012. Prior to the coup, foreign officials insisted that an upcoming electoral process had to allow opposition candidates to compete freely, given widespread concerns that the country's highest officials were using introductions to Latin American drug traffickers to buy the allegiance of key figures in the military and government.[17] The prospect that a reformer would be elected threatened to upset this arrangement and led instead to the coup. Persisting suspicions that Guinea-Bissau officials were implicated in drug trafficking led to a U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) offshore sting operation that netted a former head of the navy who stood trial in a U.S. federal court. "They are probably the worst narco-state that's out there on the continent," explained a senior DEA official in Washington shortly after the coup.[18]

Guinea-Bissau shows how the process of institutional state failure is linked to regime survival strategies. But if the alternative personalist basis of domestic political order falters for any reason, political clients are unleashed from the domination of their patron and they begin to struggle with one another to claim more exclusive control over resources. The people who are best positioned in this struggle are those who are able to use their connections to commercial networks, often illicit, to recruit and arm supporters. It is unsurpris-

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/daed/article-pdf/146/4/139/1831117/daed_a_00465.pdf by guest on 30 September 2022

ing in this light that many of the leaders of armed groups in Somalia, the Congo, and Liberia in the 1990s had previous careers as government ministers and business partners of former presidents. They are not rebels in the old sense of fighting to construct alternative systems of governance to challenge the state. The focus of their fighting is the control of the networks of power that sustained the old personalist regime. In this regard, the conflicts that accompany state failure are more violent versions of the politics that preceded the collapse of a centralized personalist order. The patterns of violence in these conflicts also reflect the distinctive exercise of authority in these precollapse political systems.[19]

Patron-client politics is not enough to ensure political survival, particularly in poor countries where governments do not have enough resources to buy off supporters. Selective applications of violence and divide-and-rule tactics help to drive down the costs of patronage. Paradoxically, this violence does not have to come from the top of the political hierarchy to be effective. It is even more effective if the ruler's subordinates are allowed to exercise violence for their own purposes. The delegation of the exercise of violence in this manner is very different from using effective security forces to forcefully repress challengers. The critical benefit to the ruler is that this alternative political strategy undermines the capacity for those who wield violence to cooperate among themselves. This political strategy also atomizes the wider society, which undermines the ability of leaders from outside of this political establishment to mobilize social movements or build an armed alternative political force.

Violence in these settings often takes the form of politician partnerships with criminal gangs. Gangs that politicians use as vigilante forces to defend their supporters and to assert claims against local rivals can double as enforcers and operatives in their bosses' shady illicit commercial pursuits. In most cases, this threat of violence across broad political and economic dimensions that intrude into people's everyday lives makes everyone less secure and prompts them to appeal to elements of these same personalist networks for protection. This parochialization of political contention and the intentional fostering of insecurity offer rulers opportunities to turn what normally would be private and even personal tensions of limited concern to a bureaucratic state into a powerful tool to disrupt societal capacities to act collectively. This is a crucial paradox of failed and failing states: Their political systems are very bad at performing tasks conventionally associated with the state, such as providing security and basic services. At the same time, these political systems are very good at interfering in even minor details of people's lives. They sweep up otherwise private or intensely local rivalries and disputes, turning them into points of tension that rulers manipulate to undermine cooperation. These parochial divides, along with the flow of resources in personalist networks, poison efforts to organize peaceful and violent political opposition alike, as they are intended to do. This political context also helps to further explain why the armed groups in conflicts associated with state collapse appear to be so fragmented.

This instrumental use of privatized violence appeared in Sierra Leone through the 1970s. Paramilitary groups under the control of politicians emerged in force in alluvial diamond mining areas of that country. These politicians enjoyed the protection of then-President Siaka Stevens to set up mining operations in partnership with Lebanese merchants in defiance of official regulations and to smuggle diamonds with impunity. The president expected these politicians to use these paramilitaries, which doubled as diamond-digging gangs,

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/daed/article-pdf/146/4/139/1831117/daed_a_00465.pdf by guest on 30 September 2022

as political muscle against his political opponents. By the early 1980s, membership in these paramilitaries, which were "encouraged from a high level," outnumbered the national army four to one.[20] This decentralization and privatization of the exercise of violence, what two political scientists have called "disorder as political instrument,"[21] was a terrible strategy from the point of view of building a state with strong institutions that could provide security to its citizens. But it made sense for Sierra Leone's president, given that he had survived two coups d'état, one of which actually succeeded until a countercoup a year later restored him to power. He survived the second coup d'état only after inviting soldiers from Guinea to help secure his hold on power. A decade later, politicians' armed gangs played important roles in suppressing a 1982 rebellion among supporters of an outlawed opposition party.[22]

Democratic reforms leading to competitive elections do not necessarily remedy this privatization violence and instrumental exploitation of disorder, even if these tactics are highly unpopular among the electorate. Rulers have their own countermeasures: When faced with prodemocracy activists, Sani Abacha, Nigeria's president from his 1993 coup until his mysterious nocturnal demise in 1998, popularly thought to have been the combined result of an overdose of Viagra and the attentions of acrobatic prostitutes, promoted an explosion of armed groups. These included what Nigerians called "campus cults," heavily armed gangs that were immune from law enforcement. These gangs even moved into campus dormitories, teaming up with politically ambitious proregime students to attack students and academic staff who were active in prodemocracy campaigns. Students at the Obafemi Awolowo University, one of Nigeria's most prestigious institutions of higher learning, alleged that violent campus cults received support from the university's administration to attack and kill students who discussed political issues.[23] Violent gangs continued to act as political muscle after Abacha's death and the 1999 transition to democratic multiparty politics. The violent deaths of six students at the University of Ibadan in 2004 prompted an editorialist to write that "intra-campus groups are being infiltrated by politicians who perceive the members cheap sources for recruiting thugs for their selfish ends."[24] The "selfish ends" included using these armed groups as muscle to fight violent electoral campaigns on behalf of their politician patrons.[25]

Developments after the introduction of multiparty elections in Kenya in 1992 highlight how political competition in personalist systems of rule can lead to greater violence and instability. In the prelude to Kenya's reforms, an observer noted that "after the incidents of July 7th [1990], the government felt threatened by the existence of these shanties. It saw in slum dwellers a vulnerable and ready tool in the hands of crafty revolutionaries who might offer a better deal. . . . The government dreaded facing an organized people with common grievances."[26] The incumbent ruler, President Daniel arap Moi, encouraged politicians to recruit local youth gangs in the communities that these politicians feared might otherwise support opposition candidates. Recruits were enlisted to join "tribal militias" and "cultural associations" that disrupted the organizing efforts of the opposition candidates. At the same time, these youth and their local patrons were allowed to use violence for private purposes, such as seizing properties and setting up local protection rackets. This merging of political and personal uses of violence looked to casual observers like the reemergence of deep-rooted ethnic tensions. It is more accurate to describe this development as the creation of neotraditional armed groups as

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/daed/article-pdf/146/4/139/1831117/daed_a_00465.pdf by guest on 30 September 2022

instruments to fragment otherwise threatening political environments.[27]

Violence during Kenya's 2007 election led to the deaths of more than one thousand people in the Rift Valley area and displaced up to half a million people, adding to the estimated three hundred fifty thousand people who were still displaced from earlier violence.[28] An official inquiry into these events noted that the "gangs are devoid of ideology and operate on a willing seller basis. Given the hierarchical nature of gangs and the upward mobile hopes of their members to become as well off as their leaders, youth can be mobilized for a variety of reasons."[29] Subsequent investigation points to deeper and more durable effects of this political strategy on Kenyans. The cycle of electoral ordeals reduces Kenyans' desire to hold elections, makes them more likely to identify in ethnic terms, and more likely to accept the use of violence in support of what one considers a just cause.[30] These findings suggest that particular political strategies, rather than degrees of poverty or latent hatreds, are drivers of conflict, and that ethnic fragmentation is a consequence rather than a cause of this violence in the first instance.

This fragmented exercise of violence on the part of multiple competing armed groups that participate in Africa's conflicts is a by-product of the strategies of preconflict personalist authority. Gone are the classic rebels who fight the incumbent government while administering "liberated zones," in which rebel leaders are able to build their social control of civilians, co-opt local notables, discipline their own fighters, and chase away or kill their armed rivals. That model of rebel governance is difficult to organize in the contemporary fragmented environment. Agents of conflict now include many more competing armed gangs attached to various politician-patrons, communal militias, vigilantes, and armed illicit commercial actors. The pervasive nature of this fragmentation is reflected in the finding that conflict agents other than government and rebel forces accounted for about 25 to 30 percent of violent acts in Africa's conflicts in the mid- to late 1990s – already a significant proportion – and increased to about half of all violent acts two decades later.[31]

The reality of the failing and failed state political environment is one of multitudes of violent local tensions that poison larger political organizations from within. This is manifest in the proliferation of a series of segmented and competing armed groups, usually rooted in increasingly rigid ethnic or narrowing kinship identities, the very presence of which is designed to inhibit attempts to organize broad-based political opposition. In addition to providing the contours of how political order will fragment in the event that the central authority collapses, this situation creates a deep-rooted social (dis)order that is the common critical element that defines contemporary state failure and the character of violence that accompanies this failure.

Effective broad-based armed opposition requires areas that are socially insulated from the incumbent regime's control. These social spaces are where movements are built to mobilize populations that will harbor and support rebels. But the dispersal of the exercise of violence and incorporation of parochial conflicts into personalist systems of political control intrudes into this social space, even if the formal institutional capacity of a state is very weak or even absent. These tactics of governance in failed and failing states severely limit public space in which people can debate and organize between the regime, the politicized economy (including its illicit sectors), and the ordinary household. Activists have to operate amidst the instrumental mobilization and the politicization of community divisions that tend to intrude into their orga-

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/daed/article-pdf/146/4/139/1831117/daed_a_00465.pdf by guest on 30 September 2022

nizations. Old-style Maoist revolutionary warfare, in which rebels build broad-based popular support in "liberated zones" that they use as strongholds from which to challenge state forces, is tremendously difficult to organize in the fragmented social environment of failed and failing states.

The organization of political protests in the Congo illustrates the difficulty of organizing broad opposition in a failing state, even when public opinion would seem to support such an initiative. The Congo's capital city Kinshasa has a record of soundly rejecting the Congo's president, a man who does not speak the local language of Lingala, in internationally mediated elections. Youth groups regularly stage protests, appearing to presage a broader opposition. But these groups encounter and have to deal with infiltration by gangs, described as *jeunes sportifs*, associated with martial arts and combative sports, criminal operations, and the militias of politicians.[32] While these groups also express popular hostility to the regime, onlookers wonder whether youth leaders actually have been co-opted to advance the interests of political cliques outside of Kinshasa that are jockeying for position in the deeply corrupt political system.[33] These activists are forced to operate in a social terrain in which a security force commander under U.S. Treasury Department sanction for the violent suppression of mass protests serves as the chairman of the popular Kinshasa AS Vita football team and thus plays an important role in youth mobilization.[34] Leaders of armed groups have to struggle against these countervailing pressures that draw recruits to fight for politicians and a political system that even armed group members may detest. The overall environment of violence and insecurity drives people further into compromises with regime-friendly strongmen for protection and economic survival. Day-to-day politics in this environment remains relentlessly parochial, even while radical political change features in the ideas and discourses of popular culture. Reflecting this fragmentation, the Congo's government estimated that it had registered 477 political parties in 2015.[35]

Political scientist James Scott has pointed out, in the context of classic Maoist insurgencies in the 1960s and 1970s in Southeast Asia, that armed rebellion against the state works only if there are local social bonds that are independent of state authority and that insurgent leaders can co-opt and rely upon to help them rule the people and to legitimate their presence. This social connection is essential to assist armed groups to govern. Rebel governance through these legitimate networks and intermediaries is essential if the armed group is to keep at arm's length the parochial and personal intrigues as rebels build a social movement alongside their armed force. Otherwise, fighters are drawn into people's personal or purely local problems. The armed group, in turn, is infected with the acrimony of these divisions, leading members of the armed group to become involved in these various affairs to the detriment of discipline and pursuit of a common goal.[36]

Leaders of some of the armed groups in failing and failed states recognize these dangers and try to find strategies to gain autonomy. For example, leaders of Mungiki, an armed "cultural association" that had a strong presence in the Kibera slum in Nairobi, were concerned about the involvement of Mungiki members who were recruited into violent campaigns of politicians running for election in 1992 and later. These leaders tried to lead a mass conversion of members to Islam and threatened to call for *jihad*, perhaps in hindsight not the most politic choice. But conversion appeared to be aimed at helping the leadership assert more exclusive control over their group's members and to insulate the organization from politician interference. The hostility of some Mungiki leaders to-

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/daed/article-pdf/146/4/139/1831117/daed_a_00465.pdf by guest on 30 September 2022

ward what they called the "mental slavery" of their previous associations with politicians and their struggles was part of a search for a distinct political narrative that would supersede the violent ethnic divisions that had become such a prominent element of the country's existing political system.[37] Insulation from and mastery of this social environment proved to be beyond the capacity of this leadership, as opportunities in petty crime and protection rackets continued to draw Mungiki members to collude with the politicians who shielded these and larger criminal pursuits. This failure of the Kenyan group to escape the gravitational pull of this crime-politics nexus suggests that the risks of radicalization may be overstated, such that many would-be jihadist groups collapse back into this degenerative political milieu before they can pose a serious threat.

The failed and failing state pattern of social fragmentation endures after the collapse of central authority. This effect tends to be strongest in the communities that bore the brunt of the precollapse regime's most intense suspicions, and thus the most concerted efforts to undermine collective action at the broadest social level. The eastern regions of the Congo, host to several armed rebellions against Mobutu's rule in the 1960s, provide such an example. Through the years of the Mobutu regime (1965 – 1997), particularly as domestic and foreign pressures for political reforms grew, Mobutu intensified his instigation of local disputes over land tenure and the rights of citizenship. He took particular care to selectively empower and then shift his support for local strongmen who would use violence in ways that would widen these parochial divides and ensure their centrality in politics. These strongmen featured prominently among the leaders of armed "rebels" that dominated the region after the fall of Mobutu's regime. Similar patterns of intense politicization and militarization of parochial conflicts appeared in communities that had histories of opposing the precollapse regimes in Somand Libya. In these cases, too, many of the most prominent "warlords" in the conflicts that followed state collapse were drawn from the ranks of those who appropriated and built upon their favored positions in commercial networks and in regime-sanctioned communal violence to field armed groups of their own.

The social atomization of failed and failing states shows how the recession of the formal institutions of the state does not simply leave ungoverned spaces in its wake. The dense networks of personalist political systems occupy that social space: ungovernable in a conventional sense, but an important element of a political system that is based upon using indirect means of domination to limit peoples' capacities to organize politically. These regime strategies also highlight how what seem like flare-ups of ancient and recurrent ethnic or sectarian conflicts really are intended consequences of the instrumental use of violence by failing state regimes. It is more accurate to portray the parochial bases of these conflicts as "neotraditional," in line with the dominant discourses to define group interests, rather than actual holdovers from the past. This alternative system of governance can maintain what seems like a significant measure of stability, at least so long as a ruler is able to uphold coordinated control over these disparate and contending elements.

At first glance, these regimes may seem much like any other authoritarian regime. But the internal workings of these regimes differ from old-style authoritarian regimes that rely upon capable institutions to suppress political challenges. Old-style authoritarians are less inclined to create the kinds of webs of insecurity and dependency that characterize failed and failing state regime strategies. Their institutional strategy, however, leaves more ground for insurgencies

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/daed/article-pdf/146/4/139/1831117/daed_a_00465.pdf by guest on 30 September 2022

to connect to and ride broad-based popular movements to power in a decisive defeat of the incumbent regime. A quick glance at the Middle East highlights this contrast in authoritarian strategies. The intense interest that Libya's Muammar Gaddafi took in manipulating conflicts through the use of kinship networks as vehicles for patronage and corruption created the social conditions that, by 2011, as Gaddafi lost his grip on this system of control, spawned a large number of militias. In contrast, the Tunisian and Egyptian regimes, while not strangers to nepotism and intense corruption, remained more dependent upon institutional military and security forces to address threats. That latter form of repression left autonomous social spaces for broad-based social movements to mobilize "silent majorities" who, unlike counterparts in failed and failing states, were not compelled to retreat to the relative safety of neotribe or neoclan protectors.

The same social forces that undermine collective action against the regime also undermine popular insurgencies. Militias based in narrow neotraditional identity communities constantly hedge their bets, readily switching sides to balance against any armed group that threatens to become strong enough to dominate all of the others. This behavior acts as a sort of anti-insurgency, constantly frustrating would-be indigenous state-builders and foreign groups that are drawn to politically unstable areas as venues in which to act out their own political narratives. For example, the internal records of Al Qaeda operatives who tried to organize the "silent majority" in Somalia in the 1990s and 2000s tell a story of poorly disciplined local recruits who remained obsessed with obligations to their clans, entangling the foreign activists in their parochial battles and causing other Somalis to worry that the foreigners were becoming the instruments of narrow clan interests. With growing disdain for their supposed partners, Al Qaeda organizers realized that these social conditions contaminated the ideological underpinnings of their efforts and reinforced local suspicions of the foreign group.[38]

This social fragmentation has important implications for foreign intervention. Foreign intervention forces initially find it easy to push back these armed groups. But the social forces that undermine popular rebellion also plague subsequent counterinsurgency operations. Intervening forces, such as the African Union Mission in Somalia, find that they cannot mobilize neighborhoods to sustain hard-fought security gains. These counterinsurgents, which this author observed, did not have to invest a great deal of effort to win over a civilian population. But when the counterinsurgents needed to identify and destroy militant networks of questionable local popularity, this task became unexpectedly difficult. Endemic social atomization, exacerbated by years of violence, led tight-knit kinship groups to hedge their bets. In this social environment, one's best protection is to maintain links to all groups that are likely to be important at some point, trading information and infiltrating them with one's own family members as a guard against future risk. Thus, it is not surprising when government officials in countries like Iraq, Afghanistan, and Somalia are suspected of collusion with insurgents, militias, and criminal networks, sometimes all at once. This microlevel strategy results in behavior that, from the counterinsurgent's perspective, suggests duplicity among the people that the counterinsurgents are supposedly helping. In undermining insurgents and counterinsurgents alike, this social context continues to defeat broad-based collective action more generally.

Another lesson from this analysis of failing and failed state politics and conflict is that external pressure for reform can lead instead to collapse and much greater and

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/daed/article-pdf/146/4/139/1831117/daed_a_00465.pdf by guest on 30 September 2022

prolonged violence. Mobutu warned foreign officials who pressured him to hold democratic elections: *Après moi, le déluge*. No doubt Mobutu reflected on the dangers of empowering subordinate members of patronage networks to challenge their central patron. The sudden introduction of competitive elections in this setting is a powerful accelerant of instability, as some have observed.[39] Tanja Börzel and Sonja Grimm highlight similar negative consequences of poorly thought-out democratic reforms in the Western Balkans.[40] This situation leaves foreign officials and local activists with a quandary of whether to support risky elections or support a dictator who has created what is a very dangerous situation in the long run but is a guarantor of a rough stability in the short run.

What are the future prospects of seemingly stable regimes that employ tactics such as the decentralization of violence alongside insider networks, including in illicit commerce to disrupt collective action through the promotion of intense social fragmentation? To the extent that these precollapse patterns are prominent features of political life in Central Asian countries, these countries may face a risk sudden collapse and protracted conflict like those in Somalia, the Congo, and Libya. The rulers of these countries are allergic to the institutions of their own states and tend to favor personalist networks. They exercise authority through controlling people's access to economic opportunities and, in some cases, manipulating community tensions while preserving presidential roles as arbiter.

A nonviolent transition from failed state politics is very difficult, given the overlapping and fragmented nature of armed networks and the danger to rulers of building strong institutions that are able to rein them in. Anxieties about leadership succession plague these regimes, as stability rests increasingly on the networks and personal discretion of the incumbent ruler. The death or the ouster of the ruler creates a free-for-all as the different armed elements of these networks compete to renegotiate their places in this hierarchy and to gain more exclusive control over resources, with the possibility of violent stalemate. These problems should give pause to state-builders, particularly when conventional solutions such as democratic elections and institutional reform risk sparking multisided conflict. The historical solution to this problem is to routinize these personal connections so that they survive the ruler's demise. Because generational succession maintains continuity in the control of personalist networks and thus reduces uncertainty, monarchy makes sense in this situation. This may explain why republican monarchies appear as features of the contemporary political landscape. Gabon and Togo, for example, saw sons of presidents assume office after the deaths of their presidents-for-life, as did Syria when Bashar Hafez al-Assad became president in 2000 after the death of his father, Hafez al-Assad, president since 1971. Republican monarchical lineages can include daughters. This is suspected to be the intention of Nursultan Nazarbayev, the current president of Kazakhstan, a man who came to power under very different circumstances in 1989 as First Secretary of the Communist Party of the Kazakh SSR.

Monarchism is small comfort for those who worry about the collapse of authoritarian regimes of the type discussed in this essay. Gaddafi's effort to groom a son to inherit the residential office in Libya did not work as planned, for example. Most people really are not that enamored with monarchies, at least not with new ones, in an age in which people expect to have some choice about who leads them. The genie of popular sovereignty is hard to put back in the bottle. The difficulty of implementing even this unconventional (from a contemporary perspective) state-building strategy

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/daed/article-pdf/146/4/139/1831117/daed_a_00465.pdf by guest on 30 September 2022

is discouraging. The careful analysis of the politics of state failure points to a different focus that is likely to be no less discouraging to external promoters of state-building: that real progress will come only when societies discover ways to stand up to the forces that divide them from within.

ENDNOTES

[1] International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, *Liberia: Growth with Development*, Report No. 426a-LBR (Washington, D.C.: International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, 1975), i.

[2] David Laitin, "The Political Economy of Military Rule in Somalia," *Journal of Modern African Studies* 14 (3) (September 1976): 455.

[3] Jean-Claude Willame, *Patrimonialism and Political Change in the Congo* (Palo Alto, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1972), 133.

[4] Paul H. Wise and Michele Barry, "Civil War & the Global Threat of Pandemics," *Dædalus* 146 (4) (Fall 2017).

[5] Mary Moran, "Surviving Ebola: The Epidemic and Political Legitimacy in Liberia," *Current History* 114 (772) (May 2014): 179.

[6] Fund for Peace, Fragile States Index, http://fsi.fundforpeace.org/.

[7] Alexis Arieff, *Democratic Republic of Congo: Background and U.S. Policy* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, 2014), 7.

[8] Peter D. Feaver, "Civil-Military Relations," *Annual Review of Political Science* 2 (1999): 211–241.

[9] Patrick McGowan, "African Military Coups d'État, 1956–2001: Frequency, Trends, and Distribution," *Journal of Modern African Studies* 41 (3) (September 2003): 345.

[10] Paul Collier, *Coup Traps: Why Does Africa have so many Coups d'État?* (Oxford: Centre for the Study of African Economics, Oxford University, 2005), 3.

[11] Stephen Biddle, "Building Security Forces & Stabilizing Nations: The Problem of Agency," *Dædalus* 146 (4) (Fall 2017).

[12] Vanda Felbab-Brown, "Organized Crime, Illicit Economies, Civil Violence & International Order: More Complex Than You Think," *Dædalus* 146 (4) (Fall 2017).

[13] "Liberia: Towards Collapse," *Africa Confidential*, April 10, 1985.

[14] United States Agency for International Development, *Final Report of the Liberia Economic Stabilization Support Project* (Washington, D.C.: USAID, 1989), http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PDABP324.pdf.

[15] United Nations Security Council, *Midterm Report of the Panel of Experts on Liberia Submitted Pursuant to Paragraph 5 (b) of Security Council Resolution 2128 (2013)*, April 25, 2014, 20.

[16] United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, "Transnational Organized Crime in West Africa: A Threat Assessment," press release, February 25, 2013, http://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/press/releases/2013/February/transnational-organized-crime-continues-to-affect-vulnerable-west-african-countries-says-new-unodc-report.html; and Yudhijit Bhattacharjee, "The Sting: An American Drugs Bust in West Africa," *The Guardian*, March 17, 2015, http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/mar/17/the-sting-american-drugs-bust-liberia.

[17] Mark Shaw, "Drug Trafficking in Guinea-Bissau, 1998–2014: The Evolution of an Elite Protection Network," *Journal of Modern African Studies* 53 (3) (September 2015): 339–364.

[18] Adam Nossiter, "Leader Ousted, Nation Not a Drug Haven," *The New York Times*, November 1, 2015.

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/daed/article-pdf/146/4/139/1831117/daed_a_00465.pdf by guest on 30 September 2022

[19] This finding is explored in greater detail in Stephen Heydemann, "Civil War, Economic Governance & State Reconstruction in the Arab Middle East," *Dædalus* 147 (1) (Winter 2018).

[20] "Sierra Leone: The Unending Chaos," *Africa Confidential*, October 20, 1982.

[21] Patrick Chabal and Jean-Pascal Daloz, *Africa Works: Disorder as Political Instrument* (Oxford: James Currey, 1999).

[22] Jimmy Kandeh, "Ransoming the State: Elite Origins of Subaltern Terror in Sierra Leone," *Review of African Political Economy* 26 (81) (1999): 349–366.

[23] Lanre Adeleke, "The Attack Was Sponsored," *Tell*, July 26, 1999.

[24] "Resurgence of Campus Cults," *Daily Times* [Lagos], June 29, 2004.

[25] Human Rights Watch, *Criminal Politics: Violence, "Godfathers" and Corruption in Nigeria* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2007).

[26] Quoted in Mwangi Kagwanja, *Killing the Vote: State Sponsored Violence and Flawed Elections in Kenya* (Nairobi: Kenya Human Rights Commission, 1998), 10.

[27] David Anderson, "Vigilantes, Violence and the Politics of Public Order in Kenya," *African Affairs* 101 (405) (2002): 531–555.

[28] United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, *Displaced Populations Report*, no. 3, January–June 2008, 2.

[29] Republic of Kenya, *Commission of Inquiry into Post Election Violence* [The Waki Report] (Nairobi: Government Printer, 2008), 35.

[30] Roxana Gutiérrez-Romero, "An Inquiry into the Use of Illegal Electoral Practices and Effects of Political Violence and Vote-Buying," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 58 (8) (2014): 1500–1527.

[31] Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project, "Proportional Violence by Conflict Agent, Africa, 1997–2016," http://www.acleddata.com/trend-2-agents-of-violence-in-2016/.

[32] Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, *Report of The United Nations Joint Human Rights Office on Human Rights Violations committed by Agents of the PNC during Operation Likofi in Kinshasa between 15 November 2013 and 15 February 2014* (Geneva: Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2014).

[33] Krossy Mavakala Kalunseviko, *Etude de la perception du phénomène Kuluna par les habitants de la commune de Kinshasa* (Kinshasa: UPN-CEPRISE, 2013).

[34] Pierre Boisselet, "RD Congo: lefoot, ce business politique, " *Jeune Afrique*, August 20, 2016, http://www.jeuneafrique.com/mag/347186/politique/rd-congo-foot-business-politique/.

[35] Freedom House, "Congo, Democratic Republic of (Kinshasa)," in *Freedom in the World, 2016* (Washington, D.C.: Freedom House, 2016), https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2016/congo-democratic-republic-kinshasa.

[36] James Scott, "Revolution in the Revolution: Peasants and Commissars," *Theory and Society* 7 (1) (January 1979): 97–134.

[37] Margaret Gecaga, "Religious Movements and Democratization in Kenya: Between the Sacred and Profane," in *Kenya: The Struggle for Democracy*, ed. Godwin Murunga and Shadrock Nasong'o (London: Zed Books, 2007), 80–81.

[38] Clint Watts, Jacob Shapiro, and Vahid Brown, *Al-Qaida's (Mis)Adventures in the Horn of Africa* (West Point, N.Y.: Combating Terrorism Center, 2007).

[39] Paul Collier, *Wars, Guns, and Votes: Democracy in Dangerous Places* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2007); and Jack Snyder, *From Voting to Violence: Democratization and Nationalist Conflict* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2000).

[40] Tanja A. Börzel and Sonja Grimm, "Building Good (Enough) Governance in Postconflict Societies & Areas of Limited Statehood: The European Union & the Western Balkans," *Dædalus* 147 (1) (Winter 2018).

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/daed/article-pdf/146/4/139/1831117/daed_a_00465.pdf by guest on 30 September 2022