When Things Fell Apart

State Failure in Late-Century Africa

Robert H. Bates

Harvard University
Conclusion

In the last decades of the twentieth century, the sinisterly clownish garb of teenage killers in Liberia, the theatrical rage of mobs in Mogadishu, and the dignified suffering of refugees in camps throughout Africa vividly underscored the significance of political order. The power of these images cried out for a response from humanitarians and policymakers. It challenged scholars as well by posing that most innocent and unsettling of questions: Why? Why in late twentieth-century Africa did states fail and things fall apart?

To address these questions, I have retreated to the foundations of my field, which focus on coercion and the properties of the state. I have also re-immersed myself in the politics of Africa. From the first came a theory; from the second, the evidence with which to explore – and to test – its answers.

The realities of contemporary Africa compel us to realize that political order is not a given; it is the product of decisions. There is political order when citizens choose to turn away from
military activity and to devote their energies to productive labor and when those who govern—specialists in violence—choose to employ their power to protect rather than to prey upon the wealth that their citizens create. Political order becomes a state when these choices persist as an equilibrium. The foundations of the state lie in the conditions that support that equilibrium; so, too, then, must the origins of state failure.

The fable that framed this analysis highlights the conditions that rendered possible political order. It also suggests the importance of forces unleashed in the late twentieth century. Changes in the global economy and economic mismanagement at home resulted in fiscal dearth: The decline in public revenues led to predation by those in positions of power and to resistance by those whom they ruled. The fall of communism permitted erstwhile patrons to abandon abusive incumbents and enabled those who had protested the quality of governance to lay claim to the rights of political opposition. Loosening support from abroad and facing new threats from within, incumbents faced a sharp and unanticipated increase in the level of political risk. And in many states, the political elite dwelt in the midst of resources bestowed by nature. Those in power could seize control of petroleum deposits or diamond fields and be better off, even though bearing the costs of fighting, than had they continued to subsist on the salaries paid to those who served the public. It was within this ambience of temptation that the value of public finances and the time horizons of elites sharply altered. And it was within the ambience of local tensions, arising from competition over land rights and over the power to allocate them, that political disorder rapidly spread. The conditions that rendered political order an equilibrium no longer prevailed and states collapsed in late-century Africa.

Changing Perspectives

In advancing this argument, I depart in several ways from the current literature on political violence. Rather than focusing on the protest from below—as do Collier and Hoeffler (2004), Fearon and Laitin (2003), Kalyvas (2006), Weinstein (2007), and their predecessors, such as Popkin (1979) and Scott (1976)—I explore its origins "at the top." Rather than probing the motives of rebels or the nature of their organizations, I instead ask: Why would governments adopt policies that impoverish their citizens? Why would they "overextract" wealth from their domains? Why would they alter the distribution of income so grossly that it would become politically unsustainable? By addressing such questions, I explored the ways in which incumbent regimes prepared the field for the forces of political disorder.

Not only do I thus change the point of entry, focusing on the behavior of incumbents rather than insurgents, but I also recast the role of the economic forces. In this work, I did not
focus on national income, as do Fearon and Laitin (2003), Collier and Hoeffler (2004), and Sambanis and Hegre (2006)\(^1\); by the same token, neither did I focus on the impact of poverty, as do the contributors to the World Bank studies of civil war (Collier, Hoeffler et al. 2003). Rather, I traced political disorder to crises in public revenues.

Not only does this work thus depart from contemporary treatments of the role of economic forces. It also offers new perspectives on ethnicity, the resource curse, and democratization, several of the central topics addressed in studies of violence.

**Ethnicity**

The level of ethnic diversity is greater in the African continent than in other regions of the world.\(^2\) The level of disorder is high. Many therefore hold ethnicity responsible for Africa’s political conflicts. To this line of reasoning, I offer two alternatives. The first flows from the inherently expansionary nature of local societies in rural Africa. Because the search for economic well-being underpins a strategy of territorial expansion, groups file competing claims for land rights and political

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**Conclusion**

fissures crisscross the nations of Africa. When states are stable, property rights are secure; when states begin to fail, citizens turn to other sources for their protection. At times of state failure, politicians can therefore marshal political followings and recruit armed militias by championing the defense of land rights. In the midst of state failure, ethnicity may therefore come to the fore. But by this reasoning, it is the product rather than the source of political disorder.

Secondly, given that in most African countries some regions are better endowed than others and that ethnic groups tend to occupy distinct territories, demands for regional redistribution take on an ethnic coloring and regional conflicts assume the guise of ethnic discord. Ethnic conflict is not a “clash of cultures,” then, but rather a struggle over the regional allocation of resources.

In discussing ethnicity, I have also noted – and stressed – the disparity between the conclusions drawn from qualitative accounts of political disorder and those drawn from cross-national studies of the relationship between ethnicity and state failure.\(^3\) The first emphasizes the significance of ethnicity; the other, its failure to correlate with measures of political disorder.

\(^3\) See also the evidence that the scale of measurement employed in quantitative measures – that is, the use of national averages – fails to capture the variability of interest, which occurs at the subnational level. When such variability is captured in the measurements, then statistical estimates of the relationship between ethnic differences rise. See Murshed and Gates (2003) and Cederman and Girardin (2007).
Rather than arguing for the superiority of a particular method of research, however, I choose instead to combine the two sets of findings. Ethnic tensions do in fact relate to political conflict in Africa, I would argue, but they do so at times of state failure.

**The Resource Curse**

Just as Africa is the continent most blessed with ethnic diversity, so, too, is it the continent most blessed with natural resource wealth: By one reckoning, 30% of Africa’s population live in resource-rich economies, as opposed to 11% elsewhere in the developing world. It is natural, then, that its politics is frequently employed to illustrate the power of the “resource curse”: the link between natural resource wealth and political disorder (Collier 2000; Herbst 2000).

Just as observational data for the importance of ethnicity is contradicted by statistical evidence, so, too, do qualitative accounts of the role of precious metals and gemstones contradict the quantitative findings. While Collier and Hoeffler (2004) suggest a close link between the value of primary products and civil wars, their findings have been called into question by Fearon (2005). They are also called into question by my research, which, like that of Fearon (2005), finds only oil production to be significantly related to the likelihood of political disorder (see Appendix). But just as a combination of the two kinds of evidence generates a deeper understanding of the relationship between ethnicity and conflict, so, too, does it teach us more about the political importance of natural resources.

Qualitative accounts repeatedly link rebel movements to the working of deposits of minerals, gemstones, and other commodities. Statistical investigations largely find little by way of a relationship between natural resource wealth and political violence. The conflicting evidence suggests to me, at least, the importance of the temporal course of political disorder. The first step involves the disintegration of the state; the second, the turmoil that follows. The quantitative evidence bears upon the first; it indicates that states whose economies have been richly endowed are no more likely to fail than are others. The case materials pertain to the subsequent period of disorder. At this stage rival forces seek to seize control over timber, metals,

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and gemstones, and to employ the resources that flow from their possession. Resource wealth and political conflict then co-vary.

On the one hand, this revision stands as a critique: Implicitly it charges the earlier literature with having mistaken a symptom of state failure for a cause. On the other, it stands as a positive contribution, suggesting an important feature of the consequences of state failure.

Democratization

In the broader literature on political conflict, scholars treat political reform with caution. New democracies, they find, are politically unstable; far more secure are authoritarian regimes and "consolidated" democracies.\(^6\) By contrast, in the literature on Africa, political reform is widely celebrated and democratization viewed as valuable, both inherently and instrumentally.


Conclusion

Clearly, this book can be read as supportive of the arguments of those who are skeptical of the benefits of political reform. By provoking a sharp, upward revision in the level of political insecurity of incumbent regimes, I have argued, political reform provoked political disorder. But further reflection suggests an alternative reading. Recall that it was authoritarianism that lay the foundations for state failure; multiparty political systems would have been less likely to impose control regimes as governments that advocated such policies could not have retained the support of the political majority. Insofar as authoritarian governments can champion policies that undermine their economies, political reform thus removed a major source of political instability. Moreover, because the evidence linking political reform to political disorder derives from less than a decade of data, it may be misleading. We need further evidence before we can determine whether the relationship between political reform and political disorder reported here represents the turbulence associated with transitional dynamics or constitutes, as the skeptics would have it, the properties of a new steady state.

State Failure

In the late twentieth century, the political foundations of Africa were hit with shocks, both economic and political, and subject
to forces that eroded political order. Posed dispassionately, Africa was subject to an experiment, as these forces pushed the value of key variables into ranges in which the possibility of political order became vanishingly small. It was the misfortune of Africa’s peoples to be caught in a perfect storm—one in which political fundamentals were so altered that the foundations of the state lay nakedly revealed: a sight that was both horrible—and instructive.

In closing, we return one last time to the fable and turn to a portion that, until now, has remained unread. The state has collapsed. And in the midst of the disorder that then engulfs the specialist in violence and the citizenry, the government turns to predation while the citizens enlist behind champions who offer protection in exchange for political services. People now dwell in a world wherein the government has turned into a warlord and where they themselves have picked up arms.

Following the logic delineated by Bates, Greif et al. (2002), we can learn more about the subsequent fate of these people. Among the insights we achieve is that in the midst of political disorder, they must trade off between peace and prosperity. When private individuals provide their own protection, one way they can achieve security is by being poor: They can “deter” attacks by having few possessions worth stealing. In the midst of state failure, then, poverty becomes the price of security. Cruelly, the opposite also follows: The price of prosperity is being prepared to fight. In a world in which people provide their own protection, if they wish to accumulate wealth, they must be prepared to defend it. They must be willing to pick up arms.

Whereas those who live in states can enjoy both security and prosperity, those who live where states have failed must choose whether to be wealthy or secure; without being willing to fight, they cannot be both. The formation of militias midst diamond fields is thus emblematic of the way in which people must live when states fail.