STATE FAILURE IN AFRICA: CAUSES, CONSEQUENCES AND RESPONSES

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This essay addresses the following four questions: What is meant by state failure? What causes states to fail? What is the scope of this phenomenon in contemporary Africa and how have insiders and outsiders responded to this process?

Different people find these questions important for different reasons. For the citizens whose states fail the impacts upon their daily lives are rarely uniform: they can range from immense to negligible depending on a wide range of factors including how closely or distantly they have previously exercised over its citizens, or how far the inhabitants happened to live from the capital city and other major urban centres. For Western governments, on the other hand, state failure in Africa is commonly viewed as both a moral catastrophe and, especially after the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington, DC, of 11 September 2001, a security threat. These dual concerns were neatly elucidated by the British Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, Jack Straw, in September 2002. When confronted with state failure, Straw suggested that ‘we cannot but be concerned at the implications for the human rights and freedoms of those who are forced to live in such anarchic and chaotic conditions’. Yet the events of September 11 devastatingly illustrated a more particular and direct reason for our concern. For it dramatically showed how a state’s disintegration can impact on the lives of people many thousands of miles away, even at the heart of the most powerful democracy in the world. In these circumstances turning a blind eye to the breakdown of order in any part of the world, however distant, invites direct threats to our national security and wellbeing. I believe therefore that preventing states from failing and resuscitating those that fail is one of the strategic imperatives of our times.

Africa is commonly viewed as a particular cause for concern because it is here that the phenomenon of state failure is most widespread and deeply entrenched. In the case of the British Government, this produced a spate of bureaucratic activity culminating in a report in 2005 by the Prime Minister’s Strategy Unit entitled Investing in Prevention. In a similar vein, after 11 September 2001 the US Government stated it was ‘now threatened less by conquering states than... by failing ones.’ As a result, the US National Security Strategy published in March 2006 acknowledged that ‘our security depends upon partnering with Africans to strengthen fragile and failing states and bring ungoverned areas under the control of effective democracies.’ State failure is thus a serious concern for both insiders and outsiders and it is in Africa that the international spotlight has most commonly fallen.

The prominence of such discourses about state failure has also generated a great deal of controversy. One important line of criticism has drawn insights from the post-colonial studies literature and called upon analysts to refrain from using terms such as ‘failed states’, ‘weak states’ and ‘quasi states’ on the grounds that they are based on ethnocentric assumptions that depict African states as imperfect copies of Western European and North American states and judge them according to external standards in order ‘to promote and justify their political and economic domination by Western states and other international actors.’ This essay is not intended to refute the post-colonial critique for it raises many sensible questions about the use of terms like ‘failure’, ‘fragility’ and ‘weakness’. Nor is it intended to advocate the post-colonial critique by refusing to use such terms. Rather, this essay will provide an overview of the dominant discourses on state failure in Africa and will attempt to understand what responses, from both insiders and outsiders, they have helped facilitate.

WHAT IS STATE FAILURE?

Discussions of state failure are essentially about the inter-relationships between patterns of authority, political control and institution building. Put another way, analysing state failure in Africa requires a keen sense of the shifting configurations of power on the continent and beyond. In most of the literature on the subject, the idea of ‘failure’ is invoked in two main senses, referred to in this essay as the failure to control and the failure to promote human flourishing.

The Failure to Control

In the first sense, failure is understood in terms of the inability of state institutions to control actors and processes within a given territory. Robert I. Rotberg maintains that ‘failed states cannot control their peripheral regions, especially those regions occupied by out-groups...’. Plausibly, the extent of a state’s failure can be measured by the extent of its geographical expanse genuinely controlled (especially after dark) by the official government.’ It is important to remember, however, that control and failure should not be seen as absolutes. A ‘failed’ state in this sense of the term might successfully control some of its territory but not all of it. Sudan, for example, is commonly classified as a failed state yet it continues to exert effective control over large portions of its territory and can wreak havoc and terror on some of those individuals and groups who contest its authority in those areas.

This suggests that viewing the phenomenon of state failure in absolute terms and through solely statist lenses is not always particularly helpful. Rather analysts need to appreciate the degrees of success and failure that can exist within a single state and recognize that so-called ‘failed states’ are usually made up of numerous (and often interconnected) zones where different sources of authority may dominate the local governance structures. In any given zone, the authority in question may vary. Indeed, as Rotberg noted, it may differ considerably within the same zone depending on the time of day or night. The authority structure could be an organ of the state’s official government but it may also be, among other things, an insurgency or guerrilla movement, a clan, a militia, an extended family, a spiritual leader, an international peace operation, or even a transnational corporation or a non-governmental organization.

To give one example, the collapse of the Somali central state did not automatically exclude the possibility that zones of alternative forms of governance and authority existed within Somalia’s officially recognized international borders. As Kenneth Menkhaus has observed, since 1991 Somalia has repeatedly shown that in some places and at some times communities, towns, and regions can enjoy relatively high levels of peace, reconciliation, security and lawfulness despite the absence of central authority. These authority structures have come in various shapes and sizes. They have included local polities comprised of coalitions of businessmen, clan elders and Muslim clergy involved in administering financial services and Sharia courts, and larger-scale structures such as the administrative centres of the ‘Republic of Somaliland’ (1991–present), ‘Puntland’ (1998–present), the Rahbanin Resistance Army’s administration of Bay and Bakool regions (1998–2002) and the Banadir Regional Authority (1996).

When analysing state failure in Africa in this first sense, analysts and practitioners would thus do well to reject a state-centric ontology in favour of a neo-Gramscian frame of reference, wherein the world is not simply made up of clashing states in an anarchic international system but, instead, is constructed by the complex inter-relations of transnational states, social forces and ideas within specific world orders. Adopting this ontology is far more useful for analysing state failure because as Timothy Raeymaekers correctly observed, what we are witnessing in several cases of so-called ‘state failure’ is actually better understood as ‘neopatrimonialism without the state’. That is, systems of patron-client relations that may or may not be linked to the official institutions of state power. Arguably the closest Western officialdom has come to adopting
such a perspective is the US Government’s anxiety about what it terms ‘ungoverned spaces’, defined as geographic areas where governments do not exercise effective control.’ Unfortunately, this misses the crucial point that just because official governments do not control these areas it does not necessarily mean that they are completely lacking other structures of governance.

The Failure to Promote Human Flourishing

Failures is also commonly used in a second sense to highlight the ways in which states, either because of a lack of capacity or a lack of political will, fail to provide public goods to their entire population rather than favouring one or other particular segment of it. The idea that states have a responsibility to provide their citizens with certain basic rights has long been an issue of debate within international relations dating back at least as far as notions of popular sovereignty articulated by Jean Bodin in the 16th century. Since the publication in late 2001 of a report by the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty, this line of argument is now commonly known as the ‘responsibility to protect’. Although African governments have jealously guarded traditional ideas about sovereignty and non-intervention, the responsibility to protect the idea has significant duties associated with it has come a plethora of literature speaking of ‘failure’ in these terms. Despite these longstanding reservations, in September 2005 African states along with the rest of the UN General Assembly formally accepted the responsibility to protect idea as defined in the World Summit Outcome document: ‘each individual State has the responsibility to protect its populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity. This responsibility entails the prevention of such crimes, including their incitement, through appropriate and necessary means. We accept that responsibility and will act in accordance with it.’ When genocide, war crimes and other atrocities occur states can be said to have failed in their responsibilities to their citizens.

Understood in these two senses, state failure on the African continent is a widespread phenomenon but the failure to promote human flourishing has arguably been greater than the failure to control. Nevertheless, it is important to note that both these views of failure are based upon a particular conception of statehood: what Rothberg calls ‘the fundamental tasks of a nation-state in the modern world’ and what William Zartman refers to as ‘the basic functions of the state’. The particular idea of statehood that dominates discussions about state failure was born in Europe and is usually associated with the Treaties of Westphalia in 1648. That year is thus commonly understood as the Westphalian birthplace of modern international society. As the Organization of African Unity’s (OAU) charter made abundantly clear, the ideal of Westphalian statehood clearly attracted many advocates among Africa’s first generation of post-colonial elites. It was also helped by the willingness of the great powers within international society to grant these states international recognition. The practical realization of this ideal, however, has been far more contested and uneven. As a result, from the outside, African states often looked like the Westphalian ideal in that they were recognized members of international society and their representatives sat on the councils of various international organizations. On the inside, however, these governments were often considered illegitimate by much of the local population and wielded the institutions of state to subdue political opponents and benefit their supporters. These were, in Robert Jackson’s famous phrase, quasi-states: legal fictions that rarely commanded much in the way of national loyalty or the power to control developments throughout their designated territory.

What this means for an analysis of state failure is simply that depending on the local conditions, ‘failure’ is far more likely in certain parts of the continent than others. More specifically, as Clapham has argued ‘those areas of Africa that maintained reasonably settled and effective state structures during the period prior to colonialism are proving best able to do so as the institutional legacies of colonialism fade.’ Where these structures were weak other forms of authority (familial, spiritual, ethnic etc.) have filled the vacuum.

WHAT CAUSES STATES TO FAIL?

There is no simple or single formula for understanding the causes of state failure in Africa. Nevertheless, the available literature on the subject often makes at least two relevant general distinctions. The first distinction is between states that fail because of a lack of relevant capacities and those that fail to promote the interests of all their inhabitants through political choice, often with the intention of benefiting the incumbent regime and its supporters at the expense of other groups within the state. Robert Mugabe’s ongoing manipulation of ZANU—PF and state power in Zimbabwe is a paradigmatic example of a regime choosing to deny basic rights to certain segments of its population in an attempt to bolster regime security. The dynamics in this case are somewhat different from instances where a regime may well want to restore order to part of its territory but lacks the relevant capacities to do so. These dynamics are apparent in, for instance, the Ugandan
Government’s inability to quash the Lords Resistance Army and Sudan’s inability to defeat the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement/Army. Such incapacity may sometimes lead to political compromises. At other times the result is simply longstanding stalemates and the de facto partition of a state’s territory. Outside of the military sphere, a government might wish to enhance the development prospects of its citizens but lack the necessary resources and instruments. The incumbent governments in Liberia and Sierra Leone are cases in point. A second distinction points to the differences between structural and contingent causes of state failure. In the structural category, three main arguments are commonly advanced. Firstly, as noted above, the Westphalian ideal of statehood has not successfully taken root across all of Africa because local conditions were inhospitable to state building and exerting high levels of state control over local societies. Although international society helped the process by granting recognition to Africa’s newly independent states—many of which became the archetypal examples of Jackson’s quasi-states—it could not ensure that their inhabitants invested a great deal of faith in or commitment to them. Not long after independence, however, Cold War politics meant that the superpowers often made genuinely national nation building even more difficult by stoking the fires of dissent within many African states that were the namesakes of either communism or capitalism. A structural argument has revolved around the challenges posed by political geography, especially resources and environmental factors. In this case the point is that some African states that were creations of the European colonial powers were not endowed with a physical environment conducive to administrating an effective state. For example, such as those in the West African savannah suffered from extremely low densities of people, which made administration and social control both costly and difficult. The same was true for much of Africa since large areas of it have ecologies that cannot easily support high densities of population, not least because over 50% of the continent suffers from inadequate rainfall that makes inhospitable environments for both settlement and agriculture. Indeed, it is arguably only the Great Lakes region and the Ethiopian highlands that have sustained relatively high densities of people. A third structural argument has applied the concept of the security dilemma to explain how fear of an ungoverned future can propel the actors within states to hasten the collapse of central government once public order begins to erode and a situation of domestic anarchy seems likely to emerge. Here the suggestion is that the Hobbesian fear that lies at the heart of the security dilemma explains why groups begin to think that their potential rivals will not be restrained by state authority once the institutions of state start to disintegrate. Analytically speaking, the crucial focus becomes understanding the ‘tipping point’ beyond which actors start to behave as if domestic anarchy exists, even if that is not entirely the case. At that stage, the dynamics of the domestic security dilemma may ensure that their conviction that state collapse and anarchy is imminent becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. The contingent causes of state failure in Africa are even more numerous with five main factors commonly cited within the literature. Crudely summarized, these refer to the influence of bad leaders, predatory actors such as warlords and so-called ‘spoilers’, bad economic policies, bad environments and bad neighbours. Firstly, much of the blame for state failure has been heaped upon Africa’s leaders, not least Maj.-Gen. Mohammed Siad Barre (Somalia), Dr Siaka Stevens (Sierra Leone), Mobutu Sese Seko (Zaire/Democratic Republic of the Congo—DRC), Gen. Samuel Doe and later Charles Taylor (Liberia), and Robert Mugabe (Zimbabwe). In many African states such leaders, having capitalized on political cleavages or ethnic divisions, have pursued violent strategies in order to accumulate wealth through the control of formal and/or informal markets. In this view, weak or failing state institutions provide an environment from which such warlords and ‘spoilers’ can profit. The third set of contingent factors concerns the political economy of state failure, especially the adoption by government of structural adjustment policies, and their effects on the budget deficits and balance of payments crises, and the paradoxical effects of structural adjustment policies encouraged by a variety of international donors. As Nicolas van de Walle has argued, both of these factors encouraged a ‘hollowing out’ of the state which, in turn, increased the chances that minor political incidents and disputes could cause the state to collapse. Such political economies did not, however, automatically produce failed states. Hence, although Zaire/the DRC and Sierra Leone were both ‘hollowed out’ before failing, states such as the Central African Republic, Malawi and Niger were also weakened by economic failure but did not suffer a similar fate. A fourth commonly cited factor relates to the proliferation and availability of armaments, especially small arms and light weapons, in many of Africa’s weak and fragile states. An environment awash with arms makes it difficult for governments to control all of their territory or protect all of their citizens because, as Michael Klare suggests, ‘...small warlord formations can readily assemble sufficient weaponry to mount a revolution or insurgency.’ A fifth contingent cause of state failure concerns the role played by actors within neighbouring states. These have tended to be either incumbent governments hostile to their neighbouring regimes (e.g. Charles Taylor’s destabilization of Sierra Leone throughout the 1990s), or international actors which, in the absence of a capable state or support from the government of their (temporary) host state (e.g. the Rwandan Patriotic Front’s use of Uganda as a base for its operations before it invaded Rwanda in 1990, or Hutu genocidaires using eastern Zaire/the DRC to destabilize Paul Kagame’s regime after the 1994 genocide). All of these factors can play a role in state failure but the current state of knowledge remains far too vague to accurately predict the tipping points in particular cases.

WHAT IS THE SCOPE OF THE PROBLEM?

As noted above, failed states raise challenges both for the great powers concerned about what threats might come out of them and for the locals who have to endure life inside them. Indeed, it has been suggested that since ‘the end of the Cold War, weak and failing states have arguably become the single-most important problem for international order.’ Although state failure is not confined to Africa the problem is arguably more widespread, deeply rooted and pressing here than in any other continent. Failed states can spawn a variety of transnational security problems with terrorism, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), crime, disease, energy insecurity, and regional instability chief among them. Not all of them, however, are equally prevalent in Africa’s cases. With the notable exceptions of actors operating out of Sudan and Somalia, transnational terrorism has been relatively rare in sub-Saharan Africa. The same could also be said for WMD proliferation. In contrast, small arms and light weapons proliferation, transnational crime (especially the illicit trade in drugs, arms, minerals, petroleum, timber, wildlife and human beings), infectious diseases (including HIV/AIDS, malaria, tuberculosis, hepatitis B, Ebola, measles, and the West Nile virus), and political instability in the Horn of Africa and the Gulf of Guinea oil states do pose significant threats and challenges to both the locals and the great powers. It is important to note, however, that these challenges are unevenly distributed across Africa’s failing states. Transnational criminals, for instance, tend not to operate in areas of complete state collapse (such as Somalia) but instead prefer areas where a basic degree of physical and financial infrastructure exists and where bureaucrats and officials are susceptible to bribery (such as Kenya, Nigeria and South Africa). Similarly, cells of transnational terrorist networks are likely to require similar levels of infrastructure and at least a degree of order if they are to use failing states for anything

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other than transit routes and temporary bases of operations. The major al-Qa’ida attacks against US embassies in 1998, for instance, took place in Kenya and Tanzania but were allegedly orchestrated from a partially failed state in the form of Sudan and an almost entirely collapsed state in the shape of Somalia. Viewed in these terms, however, most terrorism in Africa has been nationally oriented and targeted against white-minority rule or in specific revolutionary settings, notably Ethiopia and Algeria.

During the early stages of the 21st century, Africa has provided many of the usual suspects on the lists of the world’s failed states. These include Burundi (5th), Liberia (1st), Sierra Leone, Sudan and Zimbabwe. In addition, Somalia is usually classified in a league of its own as having collapsed altogether rather than simply failed. Africa’s leading status in these rankings was recently confirmed by the World Bank’s Governance Matters data set released in 2005. This data set ranks 209 countries and territories along the six dimensions of voice and accountability, political instability and violence, government effectiveness, regulatory burden, rule of law and control of corruption. It concluded that 22 of the 44 areas ranked in the bottom quintile of its survey were in Africa with the continent housing five of the world’s 10 weakest states: Somalia (the weakest), the DRC (3rd), Liberia (1st), Zimbabwe (8th) and Sudan (10th). While it is unwise to generalize about the nature or effects of state failure in Africa, it is clear that the continent is suffering more than most. Thus the pertinent practical question is how locals and outsiders have responded?

**How Have Insiders and Outsiders Responded to State Failure in Africa?**

It is possible to identify four main types of responses to state failure in Africa. First, there have been external attempts, often led by Western governments, to reassert the failing state’s control over its territory. There have also been similar Western-led attempts to encourage Africa’s failing governments to provide their citizens with human rights and basic public goods. A third type of response has occurred in relatively rare instances where international society has been willing to permit states to disintegrate and break into separate smaller units. Finally, there have been the responses of local Africans themselves. These have ranged from active participation in the struggle to rebuild and control state power to indifference and sometimes hostility towards the entire process.

**Resurrection**

Western responses to Africa’s failed states have been selective and intermittent. Selectivity is part and parcel of any state’s foreign policy and the responses of Western governments to Africa’s failing states have concentrated on those which are perceived to pose the greatest threats to Western security concerns. The US Government, for instance, has been criticized for singling out only two African states—Ethiopia and Sudan—for its current Transitional Initiative to encourage democratization in fragile and post-conflict states. (The Initiative allocated US $275m. of its $325m. budget to just four states: Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Haiti and Sudan.) This leaves worthy candidates such as Somalia, the DRC, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Burundi and the Central African Republic with few funds to help democratization and civil society initiatives. However, Western responses to state failure have also been selective in a more geo-strategic sense. Despite suffering from some of the most serious problems relating to state instability on the African continent has not attracted a major transitional administration of the kind sponsored by Western states in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Timor-Leste and, to a lesser extent, Afghanistan. In this sense, state failure in Africa remains on the margins of Western concern even after the events of 11 September 2001.

The selective response of Western governments has been mirrored, and to some extent fostered, by the intermittent and transient media coverage given to state failure in Africa. This is usually explained by the fact that failed state stories do not meet enough of the traditional Western news criteria to keep them on the front pages of newspapers or on television screens. The United Kingdom and France appear to have more media coverage of these issues than most Western states but it remains infrequent, concentrated on their former colonies, and often involves stories that score highly in terms of drama, conflict and sensation but provide little in the way of historical background or explanation.

**State Failure in Africa**

Given this context, when Western states have responded in concrete terms to Africa’s failing states, they have usually tried to address the two different types of failure discussed above: the failure to control and the failure to promote human flourishing.

Outsiders have employed several strategies to help failing states reassert control over the actors within their territory. The recent reliance on regional organizations such as the AU and to some extent the EU provide many of the usual suspects on the lists of the world’s failed states. Here the primary mechanisms have been to increase levels of foreign aid and development assistance, placing diplomatic pressure on African elites to adopt what the World Bank calls ‘good governance’, including the strengthening of the African Peer Review Mechanism, and more general attempts to implant the idea that states have a responsibility to protect the human rights of their own citizens.

With few exceptions, aid from most Western states has been concentrated on their traditional friends and allies rather than on the so-called ‘failed states’ of sub-Saharan Africa. Nevertheless, both the United Kingdom and the USA have made significant increases in certain sectors, notably in funding to stem the prevalence of HIV/AIDS on the continent. On the other hand, the so-called ‘global war on terror’ has meant that significant amounts of Western development assistance has been allocated to states considered to be in the front line of the fight against terrorism, notably Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan. Efforts to encourage ‘good governance’ have come from a variety of sources but since its formal adoption by the OAU in July 2001 the New Partnership for Africa’s Development (NEPAD) has remained the most comprehensive framework to address this issue. But NEPAD has suffered from several problems most notably those related to the bottom-up, market-driven design, the slow pace of implementation, and perhaps most significantly for both Washington and London, the failure of many African states to adequately criticize Robert Mugabe’s regime for plunging Zimbabwe into a crisis from which there will be no quick escape. However, at the same time, many African states were more than able to cope with the mayhem generated by Mugabe’s ZANU—PF regime they were also signing up to a charter for the new African Union (AU) that included a paradigmatic shift in relation to the responsibility to protect idea. Specifically, in stark contrast to its predecessor, Article 4(h) of the AU’s new charter permitted the organization ‘to intervene in a Member State pursuant to a decision of the Assembly in respect of grave circumstances, namely war crimes, genocide and crimes against humanity’. To date,
however, Article 4(h) has not been invoked. This is in spite of clear evidence that ‘grave circumstances’ have existed in the Darfur region of Sudan since at least mid-2003.

A third type of response has been far less prevalent in Africa. Despite the continuing problems facing attempts to resurrect Africa’s failed states it has been rare for the great powers within international society to countenance their disintegration or what Jeffrey Herbst has called the ‘let them fail’ approach. Nevertheless, such a response is possible as indicated by Eritrea’s secession from Ethiopia, Western Sahara’s UN-endorsed (but currently stalled) referendum on secession from Morocco, and the referendum on secession in southern Sudan scheduled for 2011 under the terms of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement. These exceptions demonstrate the power that the Westphalian ideal of state sovereignty can exert over significant areas of territory, usually through a military struggle. The rarity of this outcome suggests two things. Firstly, given the relatively large number of insurgencies in Africa, the small number of secessions suggests that it is difficult for such movements to achieve decisive military victories over incumbent regimes and maintain control of sizable territories for long periods of time when they have been opposed. Secondly, international society’s general reluctance to countenance the ‘death’ of states and their breaking into smaller units demonstrates the power that the Westphalian ideal of statehood continues to exert even in the face of such implausible candidates for ‘successful’ state building as Nigeria and the DRC.

In Herbst’s opinion, the crucial issue is not to concentrate on resurrecting the old failed state, but to think through what the alternatives to failed states might look like and ‘to increase the congruence between the way that power is actually exercised and the design of units.’ As the examples in Somalia noted above suggest, it is clear that alternative units and structures already exist but very few of them are granted official recognition by international society. The logical next step in this recognition process would be for international society to countenance decertifying states when they fail to meet their sovereign responsibilities (of either control or promoting basic standards of human flourishing). Indeed, the US Government has previously indulged in this kind of activity by designating certain countries including Iraq, Iran, Libya and the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea as rogue, pariah or evil states that are unfit to participate as normal members of international society. The logical next step in this process is to decide the criteria for selecting potential new states. This will be controversial but a reasonable place to start, as Herbst suggests, is with the question of which actors or institutions are actually providing political order in a given territory. Herbst concludes that ‘the long-term aim must be to provide to provide international recognition to the governmental units that are actually providing order to their citizens as opposed to relying on the fictions of the past.’

Local Competition and Local Indifference

Finally, it is important to analyse local responses to state failure in Africa. The first point to note is that these have not been uniform. Some locals have competed to lead the resurrection process and, hopefully, benefit from the material resources that flow from it, including foreign aid and loans from the international financial institutions. Others, however, have tried their best to ignore the collapse of central government institutions and continue to bypass state power in many aspects of their everyday lives. In southern Africa, for instance, states have long failed to meet the needs of the region’s peoples. Given the imperial foundations of the region’s states this is hardly surprising. As a consequence, as Peter Vale has argued, ordinary southern Africans have lost faith in, and increasingly bypass, a state system that ‘neither delivers security nor satisfies a desire for community’. Instead, they have engaged in alternative forms of social intercourse related to, among other things, religious affiliations, trading associations, musicology, and migration patterns, all of which show little respect for the political borders erected by southern Africa’s states. In this sense, many ordinary Africans have become adept at forming accommodation strategies in a variety of different arenas to fulfill their needs when their state has failed them.

Over time, this has produced many different attitudes to ‘the state’ in Africa from squabbling elites desperate to resurrect and then control new state institutions to ordinary people who are often either indifferent or explicitly hostile to state building projects focused on the urban centres. In Somalia, for example, not only have certain groups carried on their lives in spite of the collapse of the central state but they are extremely suspicious of any attempts to revive it. Whereas the conventional wisdom of Western-dominated institutions such as the World Bank and the G-8 dictates that an effective central state is a prerequisite for national development, many Somalis view the state as ‘an instrument of accumulation and domination, enriching and empowering those who control it and exploiting and oppressing the rest.’ As a consequence, there have been a variety of groups vying to build up new state institutions capable of repressing the rivalries of central government in Mogadishu. This also raises the important observation made by Menkhaus that state building and peace building might at times be ‘mutually antagonistic enterprises in Somalia.’ This was the case when violent clashes occurred in south-central Somalia in 2002 which were ‘partially linked to political jockeying in anticipation of the Inter-Governmental Authority on Development sponsored peace talks.’ What this suggests is that outsiders should not automatically assume that insiders are united on the need to resurrect failed states. Instead, they should canvass the opinion of insiders and think carefully about when alternatives to failed states should be put into practice.

CONCLUSIONS

What conclusions follow from this analysis of state failure in Africa? In response to the first question, ‘what is meant by state failure?’ it was suggested that most of the contemporary debate is based upon a particular conception of statehood that invokes an ideal formalized at the Treaties of Westphalia in 1648. For a variety of reasons, this ideal has not successfully taken root in many parts of Africa. As a consequence, not only is state failure widespread on the continent but significant parts of it should be understood as remaining in the early stages of the state formation process and not therefore be expected. In order to understand the contemporary dynamics of this process, analysts would do well to pay closer attention to the configurations of power on the continent and move beyond state-centric and statist approaches. One plausible alternative would be to utilize the neo-Gramscian approach with its focus on the inter-relational character of social movements and world orders. This would provide a set of conceptual tools to help understand the phenomenon of ‘neopatrimonialism without the state’.

In terms of the causes of state failure, contemporary debates distinguish between those states that choose to fail certain segments of their populations, and those which lack the resources to effectively control their territory. In addition, although a wide array of structural and contingent factors

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continue to generate discussion, collective knowledge about these processes remains limited and unable to predict the tipping points in particular cases. Finally, there is the crucial practical question of responses to state failure in Africa. For outsiders at least, the most common approach has been to resurrect the institutions of state power, usually following Weberian and liberal blueprints. Only rarely have they agreed to the disintegration of existing states into smaller ones. Sometimes, some insiders have joined the competition to control these new units. In contrast, other insiders have continued to bypass a state system that has consistently failed to meet their basic needs. This suggests that the real solution to state failure in Africa lies in developing political communities that can provide for the needs of their members and gain recognition in wider global politics. How closely these communities will resemble the ideal of Westphalian statehood remains to be seen.

FOOTNOTES


2 See, for example, Dorff, Robert H. ‘Failed States After 9/11: What did we know and what have we learned?’ in International Studies Perspectives, Vol. 6, No. 1, pp. 20–34. Oxford, 2005. Dorff refers to these two conceptions of failure as ‘the ungovernmentable state’ and the ‘bad government state’.


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