

What are the Political Causes of Failed States in Sub-Saharan Africa?

Written by Alberto Pecoraro

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ALBERTO PECORARO, JUL 31 2012

This essay aims to understand the causes behind the failure of nearly every postcolonial African state, despite the presence of great differences throughout the continent. The explanation proposed is that the failure of Africa's states originates from the seizure of an oppressive political structure, the colonial state, by an alliance of elites during a period where African polities had been completely new to the concept of a modern sovereign state. It will show this by first describing the origins and evolution of African states and then by describing the nature of the coalitions that spearheaded the independence movements in Africa. Finally, it will describe the strategies adopted by African leaders and the development of African states post-independence.

To support these claims, reference will be made to various African countries. In the years immediately following the independence of Africa, a widespread discourse of African Socialism, whose proponents included Kwame Nkrumah and Ahmed Sékou Touré, conceived the state as the architect of modernisation, through which a new society would be created (Bayart, 1993). Five decades later, African states have been unable to gain the trust of their citizens, failing to provide them even with the most basic services. For example, in Rwanda, the entire state structure from the town mayor to the general had been mobilized in view of the genocide in 1994. Even though all examples do not necessarily reach those levels of violence, the African state, in such a case, has proved to be a great obstacle for the initiative of freedom for its own people. Another example is the Democratic Republic of Congo, where the local bureaucracies still impose taxes and issue patents for every possible economic sector, while the central government doesn't bother to maintain the country's dwindling infrastructure (Englebert, 2009). Contrarily to its traditional duty as impartial arbiter and provider of security, the state in Africa has become the origin of insecurity and political violence.

The Colonial State

Reasons for the general failure of the African state must involve an inquiry of the region's colonial predecessor. The colonial state was a military and administrative entity, aimed nearly exclusively at extracting resources for the economic development of the metropolitan area. (Chazan et al, 1999). It exhibited an institutional system in which unaccountable colonial bureaucracies had, at the same time, both decision-making and implementation roles (ibid), consequently putting aside the concept of division of powers.

Despite its authoritarian nature, the colonial state was weak, and its involvement with African society was very limited, since it had little concern for the improvement of the masses' conditions of life. In this period, the rural masses rarely dealt with the state that had preferred a system of indirect rule, like the one the British had adopted in Ghana (Berman, 1998). Thus, the colonial period saw the development of a state based on domination rather than legitimacy and an authoritarian political culture that considered violence, patronage and corruption as normal tools of maintaining control over a population (Chazan et al, 1999). The postcolonial states inherited these structures, at the same time where the political culture was one in which the first leaders of African independence were becoming politically active. Those leaders would, after the independence, keep intact the structures of coercion and administration inherited by the colonizers, while simultaneously suppress, fervently, the pluralist institutions that had been imposed by the European powers during the negotiations of independence (Gordon, 2007).

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The characteristics described above could be found everywhere in Africa, but it is in the Belgian Congo where they have been the most extreme. In what would later become the Democratic Republic of Congo, the state was so intertwined with concessionary companies that the distinction between the public administration and business came to be blurred (Bayard, 1993). The state nearly exclusively focused on its extractive duties. An impressive industrial infrastructure and an extended network of roads were built, but sectors, such as healthcare and education, were completely ignored and left to the church, which had been operating 99.6% of schools (Young 1994). No superior education was going to be provided until the 1950s.

In a lesser measure, the same dynamics can be found in British colonial territories where the system of indirect rule was adopted. In Sudan, the British favoured the Arab speaking north and its trading elites, while they ignored, completely, a South Sudan that had been deemed to be just a reservoir of resources (Woodward, 2003). The British administration limited itself to taxing the production of resources, such as cotton, and exploiting the thriving trade conducted by an emerging class of North Sudanese traders. Except the maintenance and the expansion of communications, the colonial administration had not taken any significant measure to modify the living conditions of the Sudanese (ibid).

Both colonial possessions were ruled with authoritarian methods, both retained their coercive institutions intact after the independence and in both, the limits between private business and public administration were blurred because of the exclusively extractive nature of the state. In this respect, for example, the Belgian colonial state was very similar to the Congo of Mobutu, under which the central government relinquished any function aside from the extraction of revenue for a restricted group of privileged individuals. Another important aspect is that both used divide and rule tactics, purposely neglecting the improvement of the local workforce through education. Instead, they privileged an ethnic or social group over the others, bringing the increase of inequality and the creation of a small-sized, westernised local elite (Gordon, 2007).

Elites

The movement for independence was spearheaded by a small group of educated Africans, who had been kept away from good jobs and political power by the racist bias of the colonial state (Gordon, 2007). The majority of Africans, engaged in subsistence farming, were not initially involved in this struggle for independence. The rural masses would follow later, when the above-mentioned elites would decide to mobilize them. One can see that, in general, there was no unified independence movement but, rather, an alliance of interests involving those Africans who had been educated and propped up by the colonizers. This is reflected by the social origin of the first heads of state of the newly independent African countries. Léopold Senghor in Senegal, Léon M'Ba in Gabon, Kwame Nkrumah in Ghana and Patrice Lumumba in Congo were all members of this social group.

These people had been nurtured by the political culture of the colonial state and had been used to identifying the state as the only purveyor of financial resources and favours. They also saw it as an instrument of domination that did not require the consent of those subject to it (Bandoura, 1995). Moreover, African society had not yet developed a middle class that would be able to hold the new political elites accountable. The small number of members of these elites maintained themselves within a very close knit, cohesive group (Bayart, 1993). For example, the future Democratic Republic of Congo could gather no more than a few tens of university graduates, while the Nigerian Army initially counted no more than one hundred fifty African officers (ibid). So, at the end of the colonial domination, one had, on one hand, an oppressive and unjust state and, on the other hand, an unaccountable elite, lacking legitimacy and founding its strength on the basis of being the only class with the necessary expertise to staff the administration. In the few years following independence, this class would be the one to capture the state and use it for its own private ends (Bandoura, 1995).

Elites in Power: The African Experience

Independence had its winners and its losers. The winners were the urban-based African elites who now had access to the sources of political power and economic wealth. The losers were the non-westernised traditional classes who had been left aside during the process of independence. For example, in Mali a coalition of westernised bourgeois,

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organised into a modern political party, seized the state and eliminated the rival class of traditional landowners through the adoption of socialist policies (Bayart, 1993). Overall, inequality increased after independence, as the gains of the export of agricultural products were pocketed by a restricted group of people, while farmers were progressively pauperised by increasing fiscal impositions by the central government (ibid). This is also what happened in Tanzania, where the state came to tax up to 84 % of its farmers' revenues (ibid).

At the same time, governments had strangled private economic initiatives. One case is the one of Cote d'Ivoire, where Houphouët-Boigny countered the emergence of a local business class. He did not want the rise of new social elites, who were private entrepreneurs and could compete against his personal monopoly on the national economy (ibid). In general, the restricted group of people who had led the independence movements used their newly found power to increase their wealth and social standing, resulting in catastrophic consequences for their states.

This happened for various reasons. First of all, the state inherited by its African leaders was the exclusive holder of financial wealth, in countries that had not yet developed a social class of private entrepreneurs. Secondly, like during colonization, they had promoted a conception of political power according to which the access to state resources and personal enrichment went hand-in-hand. At the same time, the newly independent African states lacked legitimacy, as its monopoly had been by force, without the consent of the people subject to it. Moreover, those from below, for the first time, were pressurizing and objecting these states because independence had raised great expectations for the improvement of life conditions (Chazan et al, 1999).

In order to keep their hold on power, African leaders had devised two different solutions. The first of them was an increased centralisation of its administrative apparatus, or the creation of a centralised bureaucratic polity (Allen, 1995). Indeed, from 1960, the majority of African leaders banned political competition and instituted one-party regimes under which an ever-expanding bureaucracy was used to distribute resources to political allies, often under the form of membership in administrative positions (ibid). The fact revealing that by 1970 the 60 % of Africa's salaried men worked for the state (Chazan et al, 1999) is surely part of this trend. Moreover, throughout Africa, a plurality of government boards, ministries and police forces were created, each being characterized as a means of patronage. This was the system that came to be adopted in countries like Cote d'Ivoire, Ghana or Zambia.

The second solution was the one of spoil politics, by which the president and his close entourage bypassed state bureaucracies and headed private networks of patronage. This system was characterized by corruption, the deterioration of the public administration and endemic instability (Allen, 1995). The best incarnation of such a system was Mobutu's regime, in which the state endured a breakdown while Mobutu himself was keeping, every year, the 20% of the state budget for his own personal use (Bayard, 1993). In such a system, the leadership's interest shows to specifically undermine the state and relies on endemic instability to maintain power. The weakness of the state institutions in such a context allows the leader and his entourage to use state resources at their own discretion (Bandoura, 1995).

In both cases, all the political power was vested in the figure of the President. It came to be personalised. By removing every check and balance, the African heads of state were able to shape the constitution to his liking. This kind of structure still remains, as with how Congo's president Laurent Kabila was able to radically change the DRC's electoral system a few months before the elections, in order to win them more easily (Jeune Afrique Online, 2011-12-07).

Conclusions

This paper has outlined two major causes in the failure of African states: the colonial predatory state structures that, as we have shown, have been inherited and left unaltered by the African governments and the unaccountable African elites who have succeeded the European administrators after independence. Used to an unfair system of rule and confronted by the attractive possibilities of private accumulation offered by the state, the new rulers have not resisted the temptation of "privatising" the state for their own means, continuing a tradition of plunder and injustice. To sum it up, the causes of Africa's failed states must be researched within those states. External relations of dependency and neocolonialism have aggravated their situation but are not the main causes.

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