
‘Failed States’ in Sub-Saharan Africa: A Review of the Literature (ARI)

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Theme: The concept and measurement of ‘failed states’ is not generally helpful in understanding the economic and political realities in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Summary: This paper undertakes a review of the literature that addresses the concept, measurement and causes of ‘failed states’ in Sub-Saharan Africa. It finds that concept and measurement of ‘failed states’ is not generally helpful in understanding economic and political realities in Sub-Saharan Africa. In particular, it argues that an aggregate index of state performance is unhelpful for policymakers because it misses the wide range of capacity across different state functions within polities. It also finds that the main theories attempting to explain ‘state failure’ have important theoretical shortcomings and are not supported by the evidence. Finally, the paper examines the political economy behind why some states in the region are more resilient than others.

Analysis: The literature on ‘state failure’ has received considerable attention across the range of social science enquiry. Sovereign states are expected to perform certain minimal functions for the security and well-being of their citizens as well as the smooth working of the international system. The political science and international relations literature has been concerned with identifying why the state itself ceases to perform core Weberian functions. States that fail to meet these minimal standards have been described as ‘weak’, ‘fragile’ or ‘poorly performing’ (Torres & Anderson, 2004, p. 5). More extreme cases have been labelled ‘failed’ or ‘collapsed’. The growing interest in state failure is no coincidence. This is because the number of new or embryonic states has grown dramatically in the last half of the 20th century (Rotberg, 2003).

The interest in state breakdown at this core level has been sparked by the urgency of understanding the factors behind political violence and civil war, and the growth of terrorist organisations in many less-developed countries (Cramer 2006; Menkhaus, 2004). The proliferation of labels –ranging from ‘crisis states’, ‘countries at risk of instability’, ‘challenging environments’ and ‘countries under stress’– reflects the range of ways in which the core problem has been conceived (Torres & Anderson, 2004, p. 5).

In recent times, the failure of US interventions in Somalia, Haiti and Afghanistan have heightened academic and foreign policy interests in conceptualising the notion of ‘failed’ states. Fearon & Laitin (2004), for instance, argue that failed states create ‘international public bads’, and other negative spillovers (such as harbouring criminal organisations)

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and thus the international community needs to develop forms of 'neo-trusteeship' in order to intervene to build states. US foreign policy has been shaped, particularly since the September 11 bombings, by the potential threat of so-called 'failed states'.

(1) What is a Failed State?

Helman & Ratner (1993) were among the first analysts to use the term 'failed state'. They were concerned about 'a disturbing new phenomenon' whereby a state was becoming 'utterly incapable of sustaining itself as a member of the international community'. They argued that a failed state would '[imperil] their own citizens and [threaten] their neighbours through refugee flow, political instability and random warfare'. Michael Ignatieff (2002) adopts a Machiavellian/Weberian understanding of state failure when he argues that state failure occurs when 'the central government loses the monopoly of the means of violence' (p. 118). In the wider sense of state failure, Zartman (1995) develops the idea of state failure along the lines of Hobbesian social contract theory. For Zartman, state failure occurs when the basic functions of the state are no longer performed as well as referring to a situation where the structure, authority (legitimate power), law, and political order have fallen apart.

There are many categories and definitions of 'state failure' that have proliferated in the literature. State failure can occur in many dimensions such as security, economic development, political representation, income distribution and so on. According to Rotberg (2002): 'nation-states fail because they can no longer deliver positive political goods to their people. Their governments lose legitimacy, and in the eyes and hearts of a growing plurality of its citizens, the nation-state itself becomes illegitimate' (p. 85). 'Failed' or 'collapsed' in his view is the end stage of failure. In extreme cases, failure may occur on all dimensions simultaneously as in Somalia. However, in most cases, there is a wide variation in the extent to which a state 'fails' across different dimensions. In Colombia, for instance, the state has been relatively impressive in macroeconomic management, but has been unable to control large parts of its rural areas where guerrilla and paramilitary groups and drug cartels are powerful. It is thus imperative for any definition of 'failure' to be explicit in which dimension a state fails. Given the variation in state capacity across sectors, aggregate measures or categorisations of 'failure' can be misleading.

The failed-states literature stresses that there are certain indicators that are necessary (if not sufficient) to categorise a state as 'failed'. Rotberg (2003) identifies three important indicators. First, the persistence of political violence is salient in most definitions of 'failed states'. For Rotberg (2003), 'failed states are tense, deeply conflicted, dangerous, and bitterly contested by warring factions. In most failed states, government troops battle armed revolts led by one or more warring factions' (p. 5). In his definition, the absolute intensity of violence does not define a failed state. Rather, it is the enduring character of that violence (as in Angola, Burundi and Sudan), the direction of such violence against an existing government or regime, and the vigorous character of the political or geographical demands for shared power or autonomy that rationalise or justify that violence that identifies a failed state.

A closely related indicator of state failure is the growth of criminal violence (*ibid.*). Here the presence of gangs, criminal syndicates, arms and drug-trafficking are the most cited. As a result of the failure of a state to provide security from violent non-state actors, people often seek protection from warlords or other armed rivals of the state. A third indicator of failed states concerns their inability to control their borders and/or significant chunks of their territory (*ibid.*). Often the expression of official power is limited to the capital city and

one or more ethnically-specific zones. Indeed one measure of the extent of state failure is how much of the state's geographical expanse a government genuinely controls.

Rotberg also introduces the idea that it is possible to rank failures according to the number of dimensions in which a state fails to deliver positive political goods. In order to rank the severity of state failure, Rotberg suggests that there is a hierarchy of positive state functions. These are: (1) security; (2) institutions to regulate and adjudicate conflicts, rule of law, secure property rights and contract enforcement; (3) political participation; and (4) social service delivery, infrastructure and regulation of the economy. In this analysis, strong states perform well across these categories and with respect to each separately. Weak states show a mixed profile, and failed states are a sub-category of weak states. The main idea developed by Rotberg is that no single indicator provides certain evidence that a strong state is becoming weak or a weak state is beginning to fail. As a result, it is necessary to take the indicators together.

Secondly, aggregate indicators do not provide information about variations of state capacity across functions. There are several examples of countries that have failed economically but have not experienced large-scale political violence (such as Tanzania and Zambia). Third, the lack of political participation does not necessarily weaken a state internally. Much of the literature in fact finds that semi-authoritarian regimes (so-called 'anocracies') are more prone to political violence than either more open democracies or more authoritarian regimes (Marshall & Gurr, 2003). For instance, Iraq under Saddam Hussain, however distasteful, was not a 'failed state' in all the above-mentioned dimensions despite the absence of widespread political participation. The same could be said of Angola, Ethiopia and South Africa in the era of apartheid. The idea that repression is a necessary indicator of 'failure' is an ahistorical proposition given the construction of many developmental states before democracy became a source of legitimate government rule (Moore, 1966). Finally, the extent of corruption and bureaucratic capacity, which is cited as an indicator of failure, is also misleading. Cross-country evidence for less developed countries suggests that levels of corruption and bureaucratic capacity do not determine long-run growth rates (Khan, 2007). However, the idea that state 'failure' should be broken down into sub-categories is useful. This is because of the co-existence of variations in state capacity at a given time in one country and because of the movement of states to and from more and less severe conditions of failure.

The main problem with ranking states according to a 'failure index' (such as the CIA's Directorate of Intelligence in 2000) is that state formation is a historical process that is open-ended and continually subject to contestation, particularly in the case of new/post-war and low-income states. The terms 'state failure' or 'failed state' are clearly inappropriate since they imply that there is an 'end state' in which the 'failure' arrives in final form. The term 'failing state', as Dorff (2000) suggests, is somewhat more appropriate as it suggests a process of failing, and better fits the perspective of a continuum along which increased weakening of the state governing capacity occurs. Failure, however defined, needs to be understood in the historical context in which it occurs. It is misleading, for example, to define a 'failed state' in the context where state formation never really happened in the first place. Just as misleading is to refer to two states as 'failed' when such 'failure' occurs from very different initial conditions (ie, a state that never consolidated such as Afghanistan versus a polity where significant state formation and capacity has taken place, such as Zimbabwe). Moreover, if policy intervention is to be more effective, it is useful to establish the time frame of 'state failure':

processes of state weakening are likely to have different characteristics and dynamics if they are at an advanced as opposed to an initial phase.

Rather than insisting that states need to be pigeon-holed as 'successful' or 'failed', a framework should allow for an assessment of state effectiveness along a continuum where conflict and violence (far from an aberration of state formation and development) are an integral part of these processes. In this perspective, it is possible to assess violence, war and non-state challenges not only as 'development in reverse' (though this may occur in the case of failed states), but as both reflective of the political economy of state formation in less developed economies, and, as history attests, the extent to which such contestations have the potential to be developmental. Such a framework also allows for assessing effectiveness in the sub-components of a state. This is useful since state capacities are not uniform across functions.

(2) Causes of State Failure

There have been several theories that seek to explain why states fail. The 'resource curse' is perhaps the most influential explanation, and has been written on and critiqued extensively (Di John, 2007, 2009; Rosser, 2006). A second set of important theories of state failure have been subject to less scrutiny. These are the so-called functionalist theories of the state. A series of authors working on post-colonial African states have challenged the idea that 'state failure' is a useful way of examining how elites in actually existing political systems legitimate rule, accumulate capital and maintain a semblance of political stability in the context of underdevelopment (Keen, 1998; Bayart, 1993; Reno, 1995, 1998; Chabal & Daloz, 1999). They challenge the basic idea of measuring degrees of 'stateness' along a continuum starting with those that meet classical Weberian criteria of statehood and ending with those that meet none of the criteria of 'successful' statehood. In general these authors seek to explain how anti-developmental states have emerged as well as attempting to explain the political logic holding these states together.

The starting point for most of these theories is to explain the emergence of patrimonial and clientelist politics.¹ Many authors point out that the speed with which independence occurred created the context which generated politics based on political patronage (Cooper, 2002). The need to construct political alliances at short notice with minimal resources and the absence of party organisation outside urban areas meant that nationalist leaders –typically urban, union-based teachers, union leaders and administrators– had to rely on existing political structures. This meant finding individuals – often chiefs or other prominent notables– and using patronage to bind these individuals to the party and local voters to candidates.

There are several influential theories worth considering. First, Bayart (1993) develops the idea of the 'politics of the belly', which is defined as the predatory pursuit, or rush for spoils, of wealth and power that, as a mode of governance, takes historically-specific

¹ Following the standard Weberian definition, patrimonialism is a system of personal rule based on administrative and military personnel, who are responsible only to the ruler. Neo-patrimonialism, a term first coined by Eisenstadt (1973), and one which features prominently (though not exclusively) in the political science literature on Africa, commonly refers to a form of organisation in which relationships of a broadly patrimonial type pervade a political and administrative system which is formally constructed on rational-legal lines (Clapham, 1985, p. 39-60). In this system, the office of power is used for personal uses and gains, as opposed to a strict division of the private and public spheres. Clientelism, in this article, refers to a specific set of patron-client relationships where leaders (patrons) provide state resources in the form of credits, subsidies, and employment opportunities to clients (individuals and groups) in order to secure the loyalty of such clients. One common form of client loyalty is voting for the party responsible for dispensing with state patronage.

forms appropriate to the post-colonial state in Africa. The predatory nature of the state, according to Bayart, generates incentives for leaders to 'eat' from the resources of the state. In this model, the invasion of ever-wider spheres of economic activity by informal political networks leads to the 'criminalisation of the state'. The criminalisation of the state and its associated corruption at all levels in Africa is less a sign of state 'failure' than a mechanism of social organisation that has to be related to the specific historical experiences, cultural repertoires and political trajectories of the sub-continent through which political power is disseminated and wealth re-distributed.

A second model is the idea that the late colonial legacy created incentives for leaders to use 'disorder as a political instrument' (Chabal & Daloz, 1999). This refers to the process by which political actors in Africa seek to maximise their returns on the state of confusion, uncertainty and sometimes even chaos which characterises most African polities. The use and creation of personalised informal patron-client networks is central to their argument. For Chabal & Daloz these might include kinship, witchcraft, ethnic or religious forms of identity that are the outcome of different rationalities, and the instrumentalisation of different forms of disorder that are more attuned to maintaining social bonds that 'work' in Africa. Implicit in their argument is that the legitimacy of rule depends less on delivering rapid economic growth and employment creation than on accommodating powerful elite factions. A key policy prescription of the model is that the introduction of economic liberalisation and multi-party electoral politics are likely to allow even greater scope for those powerful 'businessmen of crime' (such as warlords and high-level political patrons who use disorder and violence to accumulate capital) to flourish, as such liberalisation policies tend to reinforce the power of 'shadowy' entrepreneurial elites (Chabal & Daloz, 1999, p. 91).

A third model is the idea of the 'shadow state' developed by William Reno (1995). The idea of elite accommodation is central to the argument. For Reno, the end of the Cold War and the rise of economic and political liberalisation policies put traditional patterns of patronage under pressure in sub-Saharan Africa. Such liberalisation processes, he argues, further undermined the incentives of the rulers of weak states to pursue conventional strategies for maximising power through generating economic growth and, hence, state revenues. In this context, economic motives and objectives are not the unique purview of rebel forces, but can also include those of personalistic rulers of corrupt 'shadow states' who maximise the use of violence to 'manage their own economic environments' siphoning off state resources for personal enrichment and the establishment of patronage networks, instead of providing public goods such as security and economic governance. Rulers address the internal threat of warlord politics by transforming their own political authority into an effective means of controlling markets without reliance on formal state institutions. Weak state rulers use new and strengthened alliances with outsiders to shed old clients and discipline those who remain. Reno (1995, p. 8), in his analysis of central African states –Angola, Sierra Leone, Zaire/DRC–, describes how leaders have based their personal power and derived individual wealth from the overt and clandestine manipulation of markets, at times with the connivance of foreign investors in natural resource enclaves such as oil.

In general, functional and new war theses move beyond simply measuring state failure. They seek to understand the rationale for state breakdown and its often associated political violence. These theories seek to explore how the changing nature of international economic and political relations affects the viability of states in poor countries.

(3) Shortcomings of the State Failure Theories

While functionalist theories provide important insights about 'state failure', they also have several important shortcomings. First, leaders are assumed to have predatory or distributional aims as opposed to developmental ones. The neglect of the political processes through which a leader appropriates power limits our understanding of the motivations of state leaders. As a result, these analyses cannot explain why capital accumulation requires state breakdown, or 'the instrumental use of disorder' in some cases and not others.

Secondly, the idea that neo-patrimonial politics is necessarily anti-developmental is ahistorical. The problem with Chabal & Daloz's analysis, for example, is that what they refer to as a specifically African problem is actually a general characteristic of all developing countries undergoing processes of primitive accumulation and associated political corruption (Khan, 2007; Hutchcroft, 1997). The key analytical challenge is to explain why some countries are able to create more developmental outcomes in the context of clientelism and corruption and why other states do not (Kohli, 2004; Khan & Jomo, 2000). For example, functionalist theories cannot explain why economic growth rates vary across (clientelist) sub-Saharan African polities, or why many countries in sub-Saharan Africa achieved rates of growth close to East Asia and Latin America in the period 1960-80 (Mkandawire, 2001).

Third, there is little analysis in these theories as to why violent and non-violent challenges to state authority actually succeed in some countries or why such challenges lead to state collapse in some contexts as opposed to others. The idea that the 'shadow state' always 'works' flies in the face of the many civil wars and coups where leaders were unable to use informal patronage to stay in power or even stay alive.

Perhaps the weakest aspect of functionalist theories, however, is the sweeping generalisation that there is one type of African politics. Kaplan (1984), for instance, portrays West Africa as epitomising 'the coming anarchy' (in which scarcity, crime, over-population, tribalism and disease are rapidly overwhelming states and societies). He argues that 'Sierra Leone is a microcosm of what is occurring albeit in a more tempered and gradual manner throughout West Africa and much of the underdeveloped world' (p. 48).

Allen (1995) critiques the idea that there is one type of patrimonial politics in Africa. He makes a distinction between two variants of the post-colonial state moving beyond the simple neo-patrimonial description. He argues that the response to the instability of clientelism in some states, including Kenya, Tanzania, Zambia, Senegal and Cote d'Ivoire was to centralise and bureaucratise power. Political parties were displaced as the main distributors of clientelist resources by a bureaucracy under control of the President. In other states, including Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Uganda, Ghana and Somalia, Allen argues the incipient crisis of clientelism was not resolved; leaders did not bureaucratise, nor did they centrally control clientelism. The system became more unstable. Allen describes these regimes as having 'spoils politics' with a more winner-take-all nature of electoral politics, more pervasive and fragmented corruption, greater economic crises, with a greater disintegration of political institutions and mediations. It is these regimes that give full expression to Bayart's notion of 'politics of the belly'.

While it is not clear that the long-run economic growth rates between these two types of politics differs on average (or whether all the states remained in the same category over

time), it appears to be the case that countries with more centralised clientelist systems (as identified by Allen) have avoided state collapse and large-scale and prolonged political violence.² The sample size is too small to make any definitive statements. However, developing more refined typologies of polities within Africa and tracing the extent to which states move from one category to another, and why, will help identify which political factors are crucial to prevent fragile states from failing or even collapsing.

Conclusion

Reflections on New Approaches to Measuring and Addressing 'State Failure'

There are several research avenues worth pursuing with respect to the interest in 'failed states'. First, more disaggregated indices should be developed. An aggregate index (eg, 'state failure indices') does not provide any information on the extent to which capacity *varies* across different state functions or sectors *within* a polity. The historical evidence suggests that state capacity varies substantially across functions and sectors *within* polities. There are numerous examples of this. For instance, South African tax collection capacity (by far, the best among middle-income countries) is much greater than its ability to undertake industrial policy or tackle HIV/AIDS. Botswana's democratic institutions are among the most robust in the developing world yet it has also been very poor at controlling HIV/AIDS. Brazil has among the highest levels of tax take but is not (politically) capable of collecting personal income and property tax. The Colombian state is known for among the best macroeconomic management but has among the lowest tax takes in Latin America, and is unable to contain decades of guerrilla and paramilitary political violence. Tanzania and Zambia have had relatively poor records on economic performance but have been able to prevent large-scale political violence, unlike most of their neighbouring countries. This variation in capacity is not picked up by aggregate measures and thus our understanding of why capacity varies so much within polities is limited in such a framework. Detailed historical analyses of the political coalitions and settlements underpinning specific state capacities are essential to increase understanding of variable state capacity within a polity and provide a fruitful ground for research.³

Secondly, understanding why some low-income countries avoid large-scale political violence does not merit particular attention. Political science has long been concerned with the problem of what types of political arrangements, or in our terms political settlements, generate basic political order and stability. This issue concerned the likes of Plato, Machiavelli, Hobbes and others. More recent examinations of the issue have argued that, at low levels of development, the general nature of political settlements that are likely to generate political order are far from inclusionary.

The principal solution through history to the classic Hobbesian problem of endemic violence is the creation of what North *et al.* (2007) call 'limited access orders' (as opposed to the much rarer 'open access orders', which characterise advanced market economies. The limited access order creates limits on the access to valuable political and economic functions as a way to generate rents. The dominant coalition within a political settlement creates opportunities and order by limiting the access to valuable resources –land, labour and capital– or access and control of valuable activities –such as contract enforcement, property rights enforcement, trade, worship, and education– to elite groups. When

² South Africa, Botswana and Mauritius would be three countries that maintained a relatively centralised state.

³ Most useful indices are not designed to tell the whole story. Actually, it is good that they refrain from doing so (Gutierrez *et al.* 2010). Indeed, a great danger of indexes is "conceptual stretching" (Sartori, 1970), trying to measure more than one thing at a time.

powerful individuals and groups become privileged insiders and thus possess rents relative to those individuals and groups excluded (and since violence threatens or reduces those rents), the existence of rents makes it in the interest of the 'privileged insiders' to cooperate with the coalition in power rather than to fight. In effect, limited access orders create a credible commitment among elites that they will not fight each other. This is the basis for a stable 'elite bargain'.

The shape of the elite bargain on which a political settlement rests is central to understanding differential trajectories of state resilience, that is, the ability of the state to establish and maintain control over coercive power, administrative authority and popular allegiance. This is not adequately addressed in the North *et al.* (2007) model. Recent work on Zambia (Di John, 2010) and Uganda (Lindemann, 2010) suggests that the shape and character of the elite bargain matters for the prospects of political stability. Di John's (2010) study on Zambia suggests how and why the construction of political organisations, particularly dominant political parties, has been central to providing the institutional mechanisms of distributing patronage to regional elites and to important political constituencies in ways that either prevent challenges to authority and/or maintain cohesion of the ruling coalition. Further evidence of the importance of political party organisation and centralised patronage in the maintaining state resiliency can be seen in the cases of South Africa, Tanzania Botswana and Mauritius. These countries all have strong centralised national parties.

Of course, there are other dimensions of the central role played by the political organisation of elite bargains within political settlements in determining trajectories of resilience and fragility (or development). These include the ideological role of the political organisation in control of the state, both in fostering national identity and in broadcasting the state's presence throughout the territory. This may be decisive in terms of developing a state capacity to ensure control of coercive power and administrative authority. There are, as well, important agency factors that intervene that depend largely on the qualities of individual leaders that wield executive authority. It would be hard to imagine an explanation of the trajectory followed in Tanzania without reference to the particular qualities of Julius Nyerere.

In sum, far more research on the nature of elite bargains and political settlements more generally is required if we are to understand why and how states perform across a range of public functions. Moreover, more research is required to explain why some elite bargains generate both resilience and long-run economic growth in some contexts (such as in Botswana and Mauritius) and why in other cases, achieving state resilience seems to come at the expense of long-run economic development (such as in Zambia, Malawi and Tanzania).

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