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Source: *Review of African Political Economy*, Vol. 26, No. 81, Violence and Conflict Resolution in Africa (Sep., 1999), pp. 367-384

Published by: Taylor & Francis, Ltd.

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4006463>

Accessed: 07-02-2017 12:19 UTC

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# Warfare, Endemic Violence & State Collapse in Africa

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*Chris Allen*

**African politics in the nineties have been marked by a series of violent breakdowns of order, and in some cases the disappearance of the central state, in a large number of states. Attempts at the analysis of this phenomenon have involved several different but complementary approaches, notably those invoking globalisation, the economics of 'new' war, the crisis of the neopatrimonial state, or social and cultural factors as keys to explanation. These either confine themselves to case studies, or treat all instances of endemic violence as open to the same analysis, in part because they treat violence or warfare as themselves the central objects of analysis. An alternative approach does not see 'war' as the problem, but is instead concerned with the historical circumstances within which endemic violence occurs and which can be seen as possible causes of that violence.**

**This approach allows for the simultaneous existence of several different historical sequences involving war and violence, and identifies one key category of cases of endemic violence which covers the great majority of those cases in the nineties: violence associated with the process of state collapse in Africa. It attributes the origins of violence in these cases to the degeneration of their 'spoils politics' systems under the impact of their internal dynamics, accelerated by economic decline since 1980 and the end of the Cold War. As spoils systems develop into 'terminal spoils', so violence intensifies and takes on new but necessary forms, and a process of state collapse begins, interacting with the growth of violence in ways that accelerate both.**

Two themes have predominated in the literature on African politics of the last decade: democratisation, and internal war. While the former theme has generated a considerable theoretical and critical literature (see Osaghae, 1999 for a recent instance), the study of conflict, war and violence has focused much more on case studies and the implications of warfare for external actors (whether multinational bodies like the UN, individual states, or non-state bodies like NGOs involved in relief and development activity). The descriptive phrase 'complex political emergencies' well illustrates both aspects.

Theoretical analysis is less well-developed, and suffers several weaknesses. Thus, while internal wars, and violence more generally, are now far less likely to be seen as irrational (on this, see for instance, Duffield, 1998; Kaldor, 1999), attempts to explain violence and internal war tend to treat all instances of these (vague) phenomena as in principle similar, and thus as open to the same form of explanation (Clayton, 1999, ch.

7), as with the related state collapse literature, notably Zartman (1994). This may be related to the extent to which information and analysis in this area has come to rely less and less on scholarly research, and more and more on those working for NGOs (including scholars such as Mark Duffield, whose work on war and violence is so impressive). From the NGO standpoint, cases of violence, human rights abuse or critical need for emergency relief, are similar and call for similar responses; and there is a tendency to understand them as instances of the same phenomenon.

Even when they have some features in common, instances of violence and warfare do not necessarily prove to be sufficiently similar in their origins, basic character and long-term outcomes, as a comparison of events in Mozambique, Sierra Leone and Algeria will suggest. One highly significant category – associated with prolonged spoils politics and state collapse – does however share a common origin, character and dynamic, which in turn has serious implications for conflict resolution, the restoration of peace, and post-conflict reconstruction. It is this category, discussed very briefly in an earlier general essay on African politics (Allen, 1995:313-5) on which the second half of the present article concentrates.

## **Patterns of Violence & Warfare**

Extensive violence and warfare became seemingly commonplace in Africa in the late 1980s and 1990s, marking Ethiopia, Mozambique, Angola, South Africa, Algeria, Uganda, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Somalia, Burundi, Rwanda, Sudan, the Central African Republic, Congo-Brazzaville, and Zaire. In one sense the presence of violence and war is not a new phenomenon, but several features of the current version have attracted special attention to it, and have suggested that we should see what is happening as a new form of warfare and violence. These features include:

- Heightened intensity and scope of conflict, and a quantitative increase in victims, the great bulk of whom are civilians rather than those under arms. Thus in southern Sudan and the Nuba mountains area a recent estimate argues that there have been two million conflict-related deaths in the 16 year period 1983-98, some 40 per cent of which occurred in the four years after 1994 (Burr, 1998);
- Pervasiveness and ubiquity of violence within individual states, ranging from genocidal campaigns in Rwanda to the sporadic but frequent outbreaks of conflict in Nigeria (for a recent report on violence in the Delta area, see HRW, 1999, May);
- Dramatically increased risks of interpersonal violence (rape, armed robbery, murder, etc) and of insecurity, linked to the growth of crime and a breakdown of civility and respect for law;
- Changes in community-level conflict. In an early study for Oxfam, Mark Duffield noted a contrast in pastoralist areas of the Horn between 'old' and 'new' forms of conflict. The former were limited in scope and intensity, used old and inefficient weapons, were governed by norms both of combat and of its resolution, and tended to have goals of the redistribution of cattle or access to land and water between the conflicting groups. By contrast, the new forms are very intense and destructive, use modern weapons, are not rule governed (though they are not irrational), are often associated with orgies of violence, and have goals involving seizure or destruction of food and other resources, and thus their denial to one of the groups (Duffield, 1990);

- Warfare now frequently takes the form of civil war, and civil war of considerable duration and resistance to resolution: there are very few cases in which the risk of further conflict has been substantially reduced – as in Mozambique – as opposed to being briefly suspended, as in Sierra Leone;
- It is also associated, though not on a simple or one-to-one basis, with state collapse.

It is worth exploring the 'newness' further, first empirically and then analytically.

### **Characteristics of the 'New Violence'**

Looked at broadly, what is implied in the studies of war and violence in the nineties – or more accurately what it is feared may be true – is that violence has become a norm within social and political behaviour, not an option and a last resort; that violence may now have become an end in itself, rather an instrumental device; and that violence and warfare have become self-reproducing, with no prospect that they can be brought to an end.

The overall pattern of violence in the nineties is associated with some five general features (though each may not always occur in every potential instance, and the extent to which they occur will vary).

### **Targeting**

Violence is directed very largely at civilians rather than rival armed groups, and at entire groups rather than unlucky individuals. The groups overlap, inevitably, and the basis of targeting can shift, as in Liberia (Outram, 1997); they include:

- Opposition groupings and organisations (such as moderate Hutu in Rwanda), those resisting state policy, rival factions, and the press and human rights NGOs;
- Communities, especially those in control of valued assets like land or food; often the attackers will belong to different ethnic or religious groupings and/or will claim to be the original inhabitants, as in Zaire. But simple expropriation through warfare is common also, as in the Horn (Duffield, 1994);
- Ethnic or related groupings (Turton, 1997); in extreme cases targeting may become or approach genocide, as with Rwanda in 1994, but also Burundi in 1972 (Lemarchand, 1996) and Sudan in the 1990s, with the Nuba (African Rights, 1995b; Burr, 1998);
- Vulnerable groups, such as children, women, or refugees. Thus children have not only been recruited into armed groups and involved in brutal attacks on others as in Liberia (HRW, 1994) or Sierra Leone (HRW 1999, June, 28-29), but have also been abducted in large numbers, as in Uganda (HRW, 1997 Sept; Amnesty International, 1997 Sept). Women have frequently been abducted, killed or mutilated (as in Sierra Leone), and we should note the general very high incidence of rape, and the use of rape as a weapon, rather than as a frequent but individual and opportunistic act (see, for example, the essays in Turshen & Twagiramariya, 1998). Thus:

*During the 1994 genocide, Rwandan women were subjected to sexual violence on a massive scale, perpetrated by members of the infamous Hutu militia groups ... by other civilians, and by soldiers of the Rwandan Armed Forces ... Administrative, military and political leaders at the national and local levels, as well as heads of militia, directed or encouraged both the killings and sexual violence to further their political goals: the destruction of the Tutsi as a group* (HRW, 1996).

Warfare also creates refugee flows (which may well be the intent of the attacks, as in 'ethnic cleansing'); more recently in the nineties, claims of deliberate attacks on refugee groups have become more common, notably in the Great Lakes area (Refugees International, 1997; HRW, 1997 Nov; HRW, 1997 March; Amnesty International, 1997 Dec; Amnesty International, 1998 Nov-1).

### **Extreme Brutality**

In some areas, notably Liberia (Ellis, 1996), Sierra Leone (HRW, 1999 June), Rwanda (African Rights, 1995a; HRW, 1999 March), Mozambique (Nordstrom, 1997) and to a slightly lesser degree Angola (HRW, 1999 Sept) and Algeria (HRW, 1998 Aug), violence has taken appalling, barbarous forms. These have included violent rituals involving use of body parts or of ritual murder; mutilation and torture, including of women and children; the forcible involvement of relatives, children and spouses in killing; and rape. All warfare involves brutal, even barbarous, acts. What has been suggested is occurring in these cases is, however, a general practice of extreme, irrational brutality, orgies of 'senseless' violence, violence as an apparent end in itself, as Outram in desperation proposes (1997:362). F Ellis begins his study of 'ethnic and spiritual violence' in Liberia by referring to the 'the savagery of the Liberian conflict' (1995:165). Later he mentions 'appalling atrocities committed by fighters, particularly the practice of cannibalism ... Charles Taylor himself has been reported, probably accurately according to some who know him well, to have drunk the blood of sacrificial victims' (192). The Sierra Leone conflict has involved seemingly random slaughter and a persistent practice of mutilation by chopping off hands, feet, ears etc. (Richards, 1996; Amnesty International, 1998 Nov-2; HRW, 1999 June). The more recent reports from human rights groups contain much testimony from victims, such as this, from Lucia, aged ten, seized with two friends last January by four rebels:

*They marched us up the hill where we were joined by another rebel and two more adult men. And, then they started hacking off our arms. When it was my turn they pushed me to the ground and told me to put my right hand on a big stone. One rebel held me down, one put his foot on my arm while the one they called 'Blood' hacked it off with a big axe. Then they did the same thing with my left hand; they hit each hand one time each. We couldn't run; they had their guns on us the whole time. It was so fast; the whole thing only took about ten minutes. Then they walked us back down the hill and back to our compound. When my mother saw me, with my hands dangling from my arms and blood spurting everywhere she screamed and burst out crying. When they were cutting me, I heard them say, 'now you will know the rebels; now you will know the bitterness of war.'* (HRW, 1999 June, 31)

Forcing individuals to participate in the killings of neighbours and family is also common. Usually the participation is limited to being forced to witness killings, but it may go further, as an example from northern Uganda illustrates. The speaker is a female student, one of a large group abducted in 1996 and held for a year by the Lord's Resistance Army headed by Joseph Kony:

*One time, a girl who was abducted from a certain village tried to escape but was caught by the rebels. The girl was brought in front of us and the rebels told us to stomp (her) to death. We killed the poor innocent girl, who thought of nothing but (trying to) rescue herself from them. If we did not kill the girl we were going to be shot by guns (HRW, 1997 Sept, 88).*

### **State Initiation or Sponsorship of Violence**

This is a common feature, and can be seen in extreme form in Rwanda, Burundi and Sudan. The government may often cite the prior occurrence of violence by non-state groups as an apparent trigger or excuse, but the character and organisation of its violence makes it clear it is neither reactive nor defensive. The most self-evident forms involve attacks by the air force, army or police, usually on civilian targets, as in Nigeria (HRW, 1999 Feb 2; HRW, 1999 May) and Sudan (Burr, 1998; HRW, 1999 Feb 1), or in Somalia during the 1980s (HRW, 1990). Equally common, however, are cases in which political or military leaders create or sponsor militias, which then carry out the attacks in place of, or in collaboration with, the army. The Rwandan *Interahamwe* militia is a familiar example; others are provided by the *Kamajor* (or *Kamajoi*) in Sierra Leone (Muana, 1998), and a variety of groups in Algeria. An alternative is for state agents to promote attacks on targeted communities or groups by arming and/or encouraging their local rivals, as in the Niger Delta or in the Kivu area of Zaire in the mid-nineties (Amnesty International, 1996 Nov; USCR, 1996; Prunier, 1997). One consequence of such actions is that the victims may themselves acquire weapons and organise self-defence groups, as occurred in Kivu, in Liberia and eventually in the settled agricultural areas of Somalia, thus enhancing the risk and scope of violent conflict.

### **War as Business**

Warfare has usually been accompanied by opportunistic looting. In the 'new wars', seizure of assets like land or diamonds, gold, and timber appear to be more important than military victories or the control of strategically significant areas (though these do have some importance, as in Angola). The reasons for the loyalty of the rank-and file may have far more to do with opportunities for looting, than ideological or ethnic motives. In addition to asset seizure, one encounters the levying of taxation and tribute (including the use of road-blocks by the rank-and-file), the use of forced labour (porters) and the seizure of people – women as 'wives' and children as soldiers, as well as enslavement in Sudan (see for example, CSI, 1999). Even regular armies (as in Sierra Leone), and forces not initially involved in accumulating resources can become looters – Nigerian units in ECOMOG being the classic case (Reno, 1996).

### **Warlordism**

Closely associated with this last is warlordism, a term borrowed from studies of China, which not all scholars see as appropriately used in Africa. It has been used to illuminate studies of conflict in Chad (Charlton & May, 1989), Liberia (Ellis 1995; Outram, 1997), Somalia (Adam, 1992, Compagnon 1998), and even South Africa, where it became common to refer to the leaders of localised armed groups as Inkatha (or ANC) 'warlords'. What these cases (and others such as Sierra Leone and Zaire/Congo, but not South Africa) have in common is the presence of many rival armed groups (often created by divisions within earlier groups, as in Liberia), and a practice of organised looting rather than military confrontation. Each is headed by a

commander (often a politician rather than a soldier) who operates through personal authority rather than military hierarchy. Such groups are poorly disciplined, prone to extreme violence, and usually highly destructive.

They operate by exploiting areas under their control, through looting, and taxing, but also by developing export trades with external business interests which have included foreign firms (Reno, 1993), politically-connected individuals in neighbouring states, and Ecomog commanders (Duffield, 1998:81-87; Reno, 1996). Commanders seize key assets for their own enrichment (and for use in arms purchasing or patronage, as with Savimbi, or Charles Taylor), while the rank-and-file are, as it were, licensed to loot what is left. It is both destructive, and reproduces warfare, even though rival groups may attempt to avoid clashing with each other, as in Sierra Leone. In the longer term, it is self-destructive, when resources run out and the basis for warlordism attenuates or evaporates.

### **Why These Patterns?**

Five lines of explanation, or approaches to explanation, have developed in the literature, each of which tends to focus on only part of what I have been describing, and several of which overlap with, or complement others.

1) *'New barbarism' accounts*, associated with, for example, Robert Kaplan's writing. These seem to me to be overgeneralised, and at times to be based more on ignorance and hearsay than evidence (Kaplan, 1994). I have commented on them elsewhere (Allen, 1995), and there is an extended critique in Richards (1996), particularly of the element of environmental determinism that can often be found in the approach.

2) *'Economics of war' theories* (Jean & Rufin, 1996; Keen, 1998; Reno, 1997b). This approach sees new wars not as a reversion to barbarism or as the result of ancient ethnic hatreds, and thus as essentially irrational, but as a response to changing economic conditions arising from the economic crisis and decline of the 1980s. Within this context, violence becomes functional (Berdal & Keen, 1997:797-800), rather than irrational, and its functionality accounts both for its presence and its persistence – its endemic nature. Thus attacks on the Nuba in Sudan can be seen as more concerned to drive them off land earmarked for allocation to wealthy supporters of the NIF regime than as the simple measures of counter-insurgency that government claims they are (Burr, 1998:23, 32).

Similarly key characteristics of warlordism can be explained, such as the concentration on economically exploitable regions and especially those with exportable mineral or timber resources, its links with foreign firms, the centrality of looting, and the avoidance of military engagements. Recruitment into militias and even armies in the nineties can be seen as providing job openings for the rapidly growing numbers of poorly-educated unemployed youth (see Kandeh in this issue) as well as opportunities for looting and thus accumulation. Collusion between the 'rebels' and formal armies – so characteristic of Sierra Leone and visible in Liberia – can be partially explained by their common interests in looting, arms trading (and perhaps drug trading), and the exporting of timber, diamonds etc.

This approach counters views of new wars as irrational, and helps to explain the short-term dynamics of war, including the difficulties of conflict resolution (see Shearer, 1997). It is less convincing when faced with 'senseless violence', and is limited in its analytical scope, tending to be satisfied with the identification of

economic rationales for individual features of violence. It thus requires placing in a larger analytical context, which globalisation accounts promise to do (see below).

3) *Approaches rooted in the nature of African political systems* and the impact of the end of the Cold War and of economic decline. Thus Richards (1996, chap. 2), looking at Sierra Leone, and Chabal and Daloz (1999:81-87) more generally, characterise African regimes as 'neopatrimonial', and argue that reproduction of the patron-client relations which sustain such regimes is threatened by economic decline, the loss of aid and other transfers, and in some cases the loss of Cold War sponsorship, as in Zaire. This reduces openings for clients at the very moment when they are most needed, a situation Richards refers to as a 'crisis of patrimonialism'. 'The Sierra Leone war' he goes on to say, 'is a product of this protracted, post-colonial, crisis of patrimonialism' (1996, xviii).

This approach goes further than locating new forms of war and violence in the nineties; it also has a certain dynamic to it, in that it implies intensified competition for resources, and an increased use of violence as an element of competition. It also implies a growing vulnerability of those in power, and thus a willingness to contemplate extreme means to retain power. Thus like the economic approach, it is useful in handling general patterns, and questions of timing and incidence; but not in coming to terms with brutality. My own approach belongs in this category, and I shall return to it later in the article.

4) *Globalisation approaches*. These are primarily concerned to explain why new forms of war (and associated political and economic organisation) should have occurred in many locations in the last decade or so, and should have shared the same general character. Thus Mary Kaldor (1999, chaps. 4, 5) sees these wars as the product of globalisation's destructive impact on national levels of political and economic organisation. This results in the decline of central authority (especially over the 'instruments of physical coercion' (92) and the growth of a variety of sources of authority and power, together with a growing informalisation of the economy, and the erosion of economic and social security for the majority of people. One common political response is the emergence of violent 'identity politics' – 'movements which mobilise around ethnic, racial or religious identity for the purpose of claiming state power' (76), or indeed power at sub-state level. Those losing power at national level, and other 'excluded elites', engage in identity politics as a 'survival tactic', which 'plays to and inculcates popular prejudices' (78).

It is also sustained by economic informalisation, which is 'the product of neo-liberal policies pursued in the 1980s and 1990s. These policies increased the level of unemployment, resource depletion and disparities in income, which provided an environment for growing criminalisation and the creation of networks of corruption, black marketeers, arms and drug traffickers, etc' (831). This context is then used to situate, rather more than to explain, characteristic features of the new wars, including the multiplication of types of armed groups (92-95), techniques of warfare including the elimination or expulsion of targeted communities (97-100), and the financing of war and of armed groups (101-106).

A similar argument is advanced by Duffield (1998) in an essay on 'post-modern' conflict which lays a greater stress on African examples. He sees the resultant conflicts, much as does William Reno (1995, 1997a), as arising from political strategies 'representing viable and innovative non-state forms of political authority. Global marginalisation has given local actors the chance to rework the nature of political



authority' (82). Later he refers to the 'emergence of long-term political projects that no longer need to anchor political authority in conventional territorial, bureaucratic or consent-based structures, yet at the same time need to establish international linkages' (97)

This approach clearly draws on accounts of war as a business, warlordism, and warfare as associated with the decline of African neopatrimonial systems. At the same time it allows greater scope than these do to external factors, whether the globalisation process itself, or attempts at global economic management by the IMF and World Bank through structural adjustment programmes, or the importance of links with external economic actors for the new armed groups (Ibid, 83-4). As a result, while identifying the 'internal' features of new wars, and their ties to the 'post-patrimonial state' (Ibid, 87), the approach is less concerned (and less able) to provide an account of the internal political dynamics of these wars.

5) *Approaches using social, cultural, and individual factors.* Such approaches promise to handle 'mindless violence' better, and can be found in the recent special issue (No 150-52, 1998) of *Cahiers d'études africaines* in Richards and in Ellis, and in Chabal & Daloz. Several studies have suggested that at least some of the sources of contemporary violence lie in local history and ritual, but not in the sense of Kaplan's resurgence of ancient hatreds or the 'existence of long-standing traditions of social banditry and warlordism' (Ferme, 1998, summarising the argument of Lewis, 1998). Thus Michel Galy sees violence in Liberia as strongly influenced by past histories of state violence visited on those in the interior, which gave rise to ritual and symbols reflected in the dress and behaviour of the Liberian fighters of the nineties, and which allow them to objectify their victims and thus perform on them 'diabolical sexual acts, murders and dismemberments' (1998:553). Ellis's well-known earlier study of Liberia offers a similar interpretation:

*in the civil war, in a world grown anarchic, acts of violence are daily performed in the familiar language of the secret society rituals, but now out of control. Ritual murders are no longer carried out by officers of established cults, but by unqualified adolescents.*

The strange costumes of the fighters – often involving wearing female attire, or peculiar objects (like teddy bears) can then be seen as 'improvise(d) masks' (1995:194). Richards' account of Sierra Leone has many parallels to Ellis (1996, esp. ch. 2), but Ferme (1998) sees the similar use of women's clothing in Sierra Leone not as improvisation but as cross-dressing, which she argues has strong connections with warfare and deep roots in Mende culture.

Richards treats the Revolutionary United Front in Sierra Leone as a coherent insurgent movement rather than as one of many warlord groupings, at least in the early nineties, the period his study covers (for a critique see Bangura, 1997 and other essays in the same special issue). Its leadership, and some of its urban following, he sees as 'excluded intellectuals', and his analysis from this point helps inform that of Chabal and Daloz, who suggest that violence at state level is the product of its growth at individual level, 'a continuation by other means of the violence of everyday life' (1999:83).

Everyday life is violent, they argue, because state control of violence has broken down; economic decline has created (and continues to create) economically excluded groups, especially ill-educated young men denied the sort of jobs their precursors would have expected; and 'criminal' activity displaces legal economic activity, as it alone functions effectively, notably within the informal sector.

These excluded groups are already involved on the fringes of criminal activity, and are alienated from the state, from authority generally, and from those who are not excluded (notably those who benefit from the spoils of politics). They develop crude and limited ideologies, drawing on fragments and images from religious (and especially millenarian) movements, populist and revolutionary ideas and texts, and ethnic propaganda. Such groups provide some of the recruits (most notably the older and earlier recruits) for the expanding armies of the 1990s – as in Liberia and Sierra Leone – the militias (Sudan, Rwanda), anti-state groups such as the RUF in Sierra Leone (which may readily become warlord in character), and warlord groupings generally.

How might this approach get to grips with 'senseless violence'? Two types of argument are offered. On the one hand, some violence may be seen as instrumental. Thus Ellis (and many other authors) suggest that acts of extreme and arbitrary brutality may be intended as acts of exemplary terror, designed to cow populations, and enhance the status of the armed group. Richards goes further, in identifying the amputations of women's hands carried out by the RUF in 1995 as informed by 'simple strategic calculations': such acts would interfere with the harvest, and thus dissuade captured 'recruits' from deserting back to their villages to take part in that harvest (1966:xx). In the following year the technique was used to 'scare away would-be voters – cutting off the hands that might otherwise cast a vote' (Ibid, note 10).

On the other hand, we may have recourse to the social and ideological makeup of the group to explain its violence, together with such factors as a desire for revenge on holders of authority and wealth (hence the humiliation of village chiefs etc before wholesale killings begin); the effect of drugs (for example, Ellis, 1998:168); and deliberate acculturation into violence of recruits to the armed group, as part of the breaking down of old loyalties and the creation of a new and exclusive community (which is consistent with the different treatment of women 'recruits', who are seen as labour or as sexual objects, not as fighters).

While such factors may well play a part, it is worth recalling that what they are being used to explain is largely limited to Liberia, Sierra Leone, and perhaps Mozambique. The accounts are more readily seen as country-specific, and as providing reasons why violence in Liberia or Sierra Leone does not resemble that elsewhere in Africa. Torture, mutilation, and cannibalism are not coterminous with warfare and violence even in the nineties, and we need to distinguish violence that appals because of its scale or its calculated and wholesale targeting of communities or women (as in Rwanda and Sudan) from violence that appals because of its extreme, degrading and inhuman brutality. Approaches that conflate these, and imply that all instances of violent conflict are systematically marked by the latter character will not serve us well in examining violence and warfare more generally.

## **The Politics of Endemic Violence: Terminal Spoils, State Collapse & Warfare**

The different approaches to the analysis of 'new' war and violence in Africa sketched in above – with the exception of Kaplan – do help us understand many of its features: its timing, its relationship to economic changes and external forces, its durability, and its sociology and psychology. They are weaker, however, on its politics, in two ways. Firstly although much of the analytic work occurs within single-country case studies, there is a tendency to assume that all instances of large-scale internal conflict will

submit to the same analysis, that we are studying the same phenomenon and the same process in each case, albeit with variations on a theme (for a collection that stresses the degree of variation, see Clapham 1998). Secondly, the question of whether and how African political systems themselves generate such violent conflict has not been given systematic extended treatment. Thus although Chabal and Daloz (1999:83) distinguish between 'political' and 'criminal' types of armed conflict, and assign much of what I shall be discussing to the latter category, their analysis is more concerned to argue that all African states are 'disordered' and prone to violence as a result of the degree to which their neopatrimonial systems of support-generation and authority-creation have broken down in recent years.

In the remainder of this article I shall argue that there is a key category of instances of endemic violence, covering the great bulk of such instances, and that (much of) its roots may be sought in the internal dynamics of 'spoils politics'. The analysis thus draws on and extends that in Allen (1995), and begins by summarising part of its argument. Before that, however, it is necessary briefly to discuss three cases of endemic violence that will be excluded from the analysis, and to say that it is not intended to cover examples of lower-level or sporadic violence, such as that that has occurred in Lesotho or Kenya (HRW, 1993; HRW, June 1998).

The three excluded cases are Mozambique, Angola and Algeria (Endnote 1). In each, the basis for exclusion is not that the character of violence and conflict has no similarities with those included; far from it, as some of the material above indicates (Endnote 2). It is rather the historical sequence within which that conflict occurs that is radically different. Thus the political systems in the three cases have a different origin and nature to those I see as examples of prolonged 'spoils politics'. Conflict itself has distinct origin in the cases of Mozambique and Angola, being rooted in the Cold War and its South Africa's then 'total strategy'.

The outcomes too may differ. One implication of my analysis, well illustrated by the experience of Sierra Leone and the Democratic Republic of Congo since 1997 is that violence generated by prolonged spoils remains endemic and that conflict resolution is extremely difficult to achieve (see further in the editorial and in Aning's contribution to this issue). Resolution may however have been achieved in two of the three exceptions. Mozambique has been at peace, and has been reconstructing its state, since the early nineties, while the violence in Algeria would appear to be being wound down by its main progenitors in the aftermath of the recent elections, though not without continued casualties and human rights abuses (HRW, 1999 Aug; Ellyas & Hamani, 1999). Angola continues at war, a war that looks increasingly like that associated with prolonged spoils (Shearer, 1997; Duffield, 1998). It may be that the Angolan political system (or systems, as there is no single source of central authority) is now better understood as having developed into something akin to spoils politics. There is however very little scholarly literature on the nature of the present political system in Angola, as opposed to that of the war and attempts its resolution.

### **From Spoils to Terminal Spoils**<sup>3</sup>

In Allen (1989) I argued that by the end of the first post-independence decade the majority of independent African states had undergone a process of political reform producing variations on centralised-bureaucratic political systems, which allowed the destabilising effects of clientelism (or patronage politics) to be contained in the medium term. A second group, in which these reforms failed or (more often) were not

carried out, was marked by the continuation and intensification of destabilisation, producing 'spoils politics' systems.

Spoils politics occurs when the primary goal of those competing for political office or power is self-enrichment. Under these conditions, patronage politics, involving the exchange of material benefits for political support, occurs only when actual competition for office occurs (mainly during the run-up to elections), or to protect the ruling group from a short-term threat (e.g. from a general strike). State resources are otherwise used either to maintain the army, the administration and a declining set of public services, or are the subject of fierce 'winner-takes-all' competition within the ruling group. For that group, public office is valued not for its powers or potential, nor to serve the public interest, but in order to achieve a cash return to the investment made in obtaining the office. This is readily seen in Nigeria, where Richard Joseph (1988) has labelled the latter phenomenon 'prebendalism'. Spoils politics occurs as readily within a military as a civilian regime, and is inherently unstable, in the sense that regimes in spoils politics systems are continually subject to challenges to their continuance, and will in most cases fall, often to a coup. Examples of long periods of rule by the same individual are rare: Sierra Leone under Siaka Stevens (1968-1989); Sudan under Numeiri (1968-1986); Rwanda under Habiyarimana (1973-1994); Somalia under Siad Barre (1969-1991) and Zaire under Mobutu (1964-97).

Some examples of spoils politics became late converts to centralised-bureaucratic rule (Benin, for example, see Allen, 1989). In most cases, however, spoils politics became prolonged for twenty years or more, with the following outcomes:

- The political system (spoils) survived, but not individual regimes (Nigeria, Uganda, Burundi);
- The spoils system was confronted by 'populist revolt', which led to a new regime, and in most cases to a different political system, which initially stressed democracy and accountability. These regimes, of which the most long-lasting was that in Burkina Faso under Thomas Sankara, did not survive long, and there are few examples (Ghana, 1979 and 1981/82; Liberia, 1980; Uganda, 1986/88). There are, though, possible examples of the pre-emption of populist revolt (Sudan, 1986; Nigeria);
- The political system, and the state, collapsed (or appeared to becoming close to collapse): Sierra Leone, Liberia, Somalia, Rwanda, Chad, Burundi, Zaire, Congo-Brazzaville, the Central African Republic, and possibly Ghana 1979-81 and Uganda 1983-86.

The characteristic political features of prolonged spoils politics are :

- Corruption occurs on a massive and endemic scale. It is also highly concentrated, in that while the practice is widespread, even universal, a small group will extract the bulk of benefits, and notably the head of state. In Nigeria one could see this process being attempted, especially under Abacha, but it was not possible to achieve the same degree of concentration as in smaller states, or ones in which residual power is more concentrated in a group around the head of state (as in Zaire under Mobutu). Ultimately assets may be directly seized, or allocated to political supporters (or external bodies like firms or private security companies), and extraction carried out privately rather than through state machinery;

- A more or less complete withdrawal by the state from a large range of functions and services (health, education, roads, economic management, law and order, justice etc), as in Sierra Leone from the early eighties (Abraham & Sesay, 1993), or Zaire in the 1990s. This may be complemented by withdrawal *from* the state by citizens, notably in the areas of tax payment and obedience to the law/central authority (but not necessarily local authorities, especially those with roots in the past, such as chiefs). Seemingly similar behaviour may occur in centralised-bureaucratic states in the 1980s, as the result of economic decline, structural adjustment programmes, and a reduced grip on the state; the extent is less, however, and outcome quite different;
- Ethnic conflict (and sometimes religious and/or regional conflict) not only becomes commonplace – see Nigeria – but is often promoted deliberately by the state (Rwanda, Burundi, Liberia, Somalia, Sudan). As a result of such promotion, and the resort to arms by threatened groups, localised and highly destructive forms of warfare occur, and eventually warlordism;
- This is but one form taken by a broader pattern of political violence, for which the central or local state is – again – frequently responsible, especially in combination with ethnic conflict. Thus in Rwanda, ‘in addition to their increasing resort to coercion to protect their power, Habyarimana and his supporters sought to undercut the opposition and retain legitimacy through a strategy I call the ‘organisation of chaos’. Beginning with the formation of the multiparty government in 1992, Habyarimana’s supporters began to sow disorder in society’ (Longman, 1999:348). A little later in Zaire there were a series of violent attempts at dispossessing or expelling ethnic groups in various provinces, notably Kasai and Kivu. The last of these attempts, in North and South Kivu in 1996, in part involved attempts headed by the local Prefect to seize control of land farmed by Banyamulenge communities or individuals, descended from groups that had migrated in past centuries from what became Rwanda. To assist in this, the Prefect mobilised local units of the army and police, ethnic militias drawn from ‘indigenous’ communities, and armed bands from the Interahamwe and Rwanda Army groupings based in the Rwandan refugee camps in the area (Amnesty International, 1996 Nov; Prunier, 1997). It was this attempt that led directly to the final collapse of the Mobutu regime and Zairean state;
- Monopolisation of power. Where the head of state possesses the means to achieve this, there is intense resistance to any transfer of power (e.g. Rwanda), not simply because of the threat of loss of access to wealth, but because of the need to avoid accountability for past abuses and violence (to defend the ‘impunity’ of ruling groups; see, for example, Burundi). Attempts at retention may however be undermined by the next process;
- Erosion of control of coercion. At its simplest, failure to pay and equip the security forces may lead both to loss of control and to units themselves becoming violent looters, as with the Zairean Army. Other sources of loss of control lie in the growth of divisions within the security forces, often over the allocation of spoils, and the development of local armed groups, in the form of militias or self-defence groups.

## From Prolonged Spoils to Terminal Spoils

Two processes emerge from these features, depending on their relative weight, and each having local variations:

1) The combination of corruption and withdrawal tend to promote an *implosion* of the state, in which it ceases to exercise administrative or legal authority outside the capital (and quite possibly not even within all parts of the capital), while the elite join in a sort of corruption 'feeding frenzy', visible in Zaire from the mid-eighties, and in embryo form in Ghana in 1979-81, under Limann. In this version, state collapse takes the form of the fading away of the state; it may be accompanied by some violence, but the underlying process is not itself one of violent disruption, so much as steady erosion;

2) The other three features promote an *explosion* of the state, in which it turns on its own population (or parts of it, as in Rwanda and Sudan), and/or in which the original regime is replaced by a collection of warring armed factions, often headed by warlords (Somalia, Liberia, Chad; Sierra Leone).

The timing of these events, the great bulk of which occur in the 1990s, with Chad as the main exception, is linked to two broader phenomena, affecting all African states in different ways. The end of the Cold War, together with the economic marginalisation of Africa, led to a loss of external interest in the fate of particular regimes (or growing hostility to them, as with 'fundamentalist' Sudan), and the loss of resources, both external and internal (leading to loss of state capacity, and increased internal competition). Furthermore, the onset of terminal spoils itself is hastened by economic decline arising from prolonged spoils politics; thus what we are examining is not a sudden crisis (as the Rwanda massacres were initially characterised), but a gradually intensifying process which eventually results in a qualitative shift – the collapse of the state.

## State Collapse

We can now characterise and summarise the main features that occur with the terminal stages of spoils politics. In combination they represent an acute political, social and economic crisis which it is very difficult to resolve, although some attempts have been made.

The main political features include:

- The decline or disappearance of state functions and offices; in some cases even very basic activities (security; central banking functions) may be carried out by private entities (as in Sierra Leone where the pre-1996 regime used private security firms like Executive Outcomes as security forces (Howe, 1998), while the post-1996 regime came to rely on the *Kamajors/Kamajoi*);
- Abusive use of remaining institutions, notably the army and police, or the capacity to tax, though this is usually only of external trade;
- Contraction, fragmentation or disappearance of central authority, even when – as in Zaire – it is 'held' by a long-standing head of state; by the mid-1990s Mobutu had very little control over events (Young, 1994; Clark, 1998);

- Relationships between the state and society consist very largely of mutual avoidance, or violence and resource extraction (for example, taxation, looting etc).

Associated with these are several economic features, including:

- General contraction of the economy, through the loss of state economic activity and the decline of infrastructure, law and security (this is hard to quantify, and easy to overestimate, as much of the formal economy is replaced by unrecorded informal sector activity);
- Contraction may in turn lead to acute decline, including the loss of the bulk of trade and agriculture (even of food for autosubsistence). This occurs especially during war, though some forms of trade survive war, or even thrive on it, as the 'economics of war' school have pointed out. Poverty and food insecurity become acute and may be deliberately induced by the state (Somalia pre-1991, Sudan);
- Alternatively, there is a marked growth of the 'second economy' notably in illegal or criminal activity (e.g. smuggling, drug trading etc), and the revival of forced labour (and slavery), often associated with warlordism. We can see early examples of the former in Ghana in the 1970s (*kalabule*) and in Uganda in 1975-86 (*magendo*);

The social consequences of these processes are devastating, and include:

- The widespread collapse of social institutions, especially those that in any way rely on the state, but including the social bases of the 'way of life' of entire communities; often this is because the state has itself especially targeted key social institutions (such as the peace-making committees of elders in Somalia), or NGOs, or entire communities (Sudan, Liberia);
- The general erosion of family and community as social institutions, arising from such features as systematic rape by soldiers, the use of child soldiers, the (sometimes deliberate) spread of disease, notably AIDS, the destruction of rural economies in war, and the forced movement of refugees. These may also arise in some cases of civil war not associated with collapse, but in which one of the warring parties resembles a warlord organisation, as in Mozambique (1980-92) and Angola (1980 onwards);
- Social relations become increasingly marked by violence, crime and exploitation. Although this is less documented in the academic literature, there also appears to be a general demoralisation, a loss of a sense of the rule of law or of a legitimate role for the state, and changes in values, notably moral values.

### **Terminal Spoils, State Collapse & Endemic Violence**

In the final stage of spoils politics, that of 'terminal spoils', the intensification of its characteristic features produces qualitative changes which underlie state collapse in its two forms. Thus corruption and monopolisation of resources underlie many of the features of economic collapse listed above, though in no case are they uniquely responsible. Three political features are especially significant and undergo marked changes, to show features that do not occur in earlier stages.

Firstly, spoils politics has always been marked by a strong desire to retain power. In terminal spoils, this becomes a willingness to defend it all costs including endemic violence and civil war, combined with an acute fear of peace and democratic reforms, and opposition even to a sharing of power. The reasons are that loss of power leads, as before, to loss of resources; in terminal spoils, it leads to the threat of permanent denial of access to resources, not just for accumulation of wealth, but for survival. Loss or sharing of power also undermines the myths and ideologies that are used to exert control over one's 'own people', notably ethnic ideologies in which monopolisation of power is all that stands between one's own ethnic group and extermination (Lemarchand, 1996). Once power is lost, or shared, the hollowness of this claim will become evident, and political control of the ethnic group will be eroded. Finally, the loss of total power ends immunity from accountability for the gross abuses of human rights of which leaders of spoils systems are always guilty.

Secondly, ethnic consciousness, organisation and conflict are promoted in extreme fashion. This can be seen in the displacement of 'moderate' ethnic leaders by extremists (Burundi), in 'ethnic cleansing' (Zaire, Liberia), and in the growth of attacks on ethnic (sub)groups which are designed not to intimate, subdue, or displace, but to eliminate those groups; this may include systematic rape. Associated with this may be the development of ethnic myths and accounts into full-blown racist ideologies, which are often disseminated by radio and newspapers, underpinning and being used to justify or excuse state policies or asset seizure, ethnic cleansing, and genocide (for example, Chrétien, 1995).

Thirdly, violence becomes endemic and intensified. This is not only a matter of the state becoming violent towards its own citizens more often, more swiftly, or more forcefully; nor of non-state forces increasingly turning to violence, although all of these can be seen. Nor does it arise from the ready availability of weapons, including modern, high-tech, weaponry, although this makes a contribution. It is also, and more significantly, a matter of a change in the politics of violence. Its goals change towards community destruction, systematic rape, and enslavement. Violence becomes the prime means of political action (politics *is* violence), as is evident in the emergence of warlordism, 'ethnic cleansing', and ultimately genocide. And these shifts underpin and make instrumental the emergence of extreme, brutal and seemingly senseless violence.

Thus, while external economic and political processes such as those highlighted in globalisation approaches are important contributors to the origins of endemic violence in contemporary Africa, it is the internal dynamics of spoils politics that is at the root of political and social violence in those states that belong to this category. In its early stages it constitutes the 'structural violence' to which Ferme (1998) refers in her study of Sierra Leone; its later stages it comes to be the dominant feature of political interaction and change.

Seeing the sources of violence in this way has two implications. First, the organisation and promotion of war and violence can indeed involve 'innovative ... forms of political authority' as Reno and Duffield suggest (see above); but to see these as 'viable' or as 'long-term political projects' (Duffield, 1998:82, 97) goes beyond the evidence and is inconsistent with my analysis, which sees them as final manoeuvres in the dying years of a type of political system. The second implication concerns conflict resolution, which has proved very difficult in these cases. My analysis suggests a key reason for this is that resolution requires – in addition to



demobilisation, demilitarisation, economic and social reconstruction etc. – the creation of a political system that is wholly distinct from spoils politics. The current forms of resolution, and especially those promoted by external bodies, tend to rely on internal actors who are themselves creatures of prolonged or terminal spoils, like those involved in Liberia, Somalia or Sierra Leone. There is no reason to suppose that entrusting the creation and preservation of lasting peace to a former (?) warlord is a viable strategy; a recurrence of violence, as in Sierra Leone after 1996, is far more likely.

## Endnotes

1) I would also exclude armed liberation struggles such as those in Eritrea and Tigray, and inter-state conflicts. The activity of certain insurgent groups, such as the NRM in Uganda before 1986, or the Rwandan Patriotic Front in 1990-94, while forming part of histories of endemic violence, need not be open to the same characterisation or analysis as that of militias, warlord groups etc.

2) Much of the material cited in this study is concerned with the content of endemic violence, and people's engagement with it, as killers, victims or resisters (see e.g. Nordstrom, 1997); my purpose is not a comparative study of violence, but an understanding of the relationship between it and a common but minority form of political system encountered in Africa.

3) The remainder of this paper is based on a very large amount of case-study material on African politics since the 1970s, which it would be absurd to list in full. Instead, I shall give a few examples. For Sierra Leone, I have used the work of Reno (1995a, 1997, 1998), Zack-Williams (e.g. 1999), Smith (1997) and Steve Riley's many shorter pieces; for Liberia Ellis (1995), Outram (1997), Osaghae (1996), Clapham (1988, 1989) and Sawyer (1992); and for Zaire, Young & Turner (1985), Schatzberg (1988), Willame (1992, 1997), Leslie (1993), Young (1994), Metz (1997), and Clark (1998).

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