Social Conflict and Political Violence in Africa

A growing fraction of the world's civil wars seem to be breaking out on the African continent, and in the last few decades it has acquired a reputation as a hotbed of violence and warfare. Social conflict and political violence in Africa is a complex subject, and it will be useful to note a few trends in African civil violence, discuss a common (but misleading) explanations for civil wars in Africa, and then suggest two alternative framing for the patterns observed.

Trends in African Civil Wars

There are three broad trends worth noting about violence in Africa.

First, contrary to the jarring images of violence and famine that tend to characterize Western imaginations, violent civil conflict is quite a rare phenomenon in Africa. Virtually all of Africa's states had their borders drawn by colonial powers, and today contain substantial ethnic minority groups. Most have gone from independence to the present day without falling prey to civil war, despite extraordinary ethnic, religious, and tribal diversity.

Second, while internal conflict -- civil war -- is somewhat more common among African states than states in some other parts of the world, it is worth noting that since independence there have been very few wars between African states. Clashes between rebels and government militias are the most common form of armed conflict, and pitched battles between state armies are virtually unheard of. The recent 1998 war between Ethiopia and Eritrea is one of the few exceptions to this rule. The Organization of African Unity (OAU) has been effective at creating a strong norm of non-interference by African countries into each other's internal affairs, which has prevented cross-border conflicts from escalating. As a result, most borders are thousands of miles long, undefended, and totally permeable, making smuggling and migration impossible to police.

Third, since the 53 states of Africa are quite varied and diverse, it is important to note that they have produced strikingly different patterns of civil violence. Africa has been home to wars of decolonization, secessionist struggles by minority groups, long-running guerrilla insurgencies, coups, urban unrest in sprawling slums, clashes between paramilitary thugs with ties to political parties, simple criminal banditry, coordinated mass-murder by state authorities, and anarchic state failure. In a short note like this it is tempting to generalize broadly based on the experiences of a single country, but the experiences of Liberia, Ethiopia, Mozambique, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo -- all of which have fallen prey to long-running civil wars -- are quite different. This short note will trace a few broad patterns, but it should not be taken as a substitute for careful investigation into an individual country's experiences.

The Standard Argument: Ethnic, Tribal, and Clan Hatreds

Many commentators suggest that underlying ethnic cleavages in Africa are the source of domestic instability and conflict. Rebel groups (and political parties) are organized on clan, tribal, or ethnic lines, and politicians and would-be leaders often play upon ethnic differences to rise to power. This sort of explanation is always intuitively appealing to journalists, as well, because when they arrive on the scene and ask participants why they are fighting, the participants almost always frame their grievance in terms of ancient hatreds between groups or government discrimination against a group or clan. A striking problem with this explanation is that ethnic grievances are everywhere in Africa, but civil war is (as suggested above) really quite rare. Africa has 53 states, dozens of religions, hundreds of ethnic and language groups, and probably thousands of tribal, clan, and familial groupings. Most of them probably feel aggrieved towards others. Hardly any of them settle their differences by fighting. Most groups find ways to cooperate most of the time.

Since the early 1990s, there has been a subtle refinement of the "underlying ethnic differences" narrative, which emphasizes that group friction is necessary but not sufficient to create armed clashes. So long as there is a strong state to serve as a third party mediating between ethnic groups, it's fairly easy to get peaceful outcomes between various groups. But when the state grows extremely weak, like in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Somalia, and Liberia, this is no longer possible. One clan's uncertainty about the intentions of the other clan leads to a cycle of mistrust, eventually leading to conflict. Since (it is assumed) no group knows the other's intentions, each has an incentive to build up their stores of weapons to protect
itself from attack by the other group. But since militias armed with light, cheap weapons (e.g., machine guns, axes, farm tools, machetes) can attack their neighbors at any time, a defensive build-up can appear threatening. This explanation gained prominence in the 1990s.

This potentially powerful explanation also does not really explain patterns of violence in African states. Rather than being completely absent and allowing local tensions to escalate unchecked, state military and police forces are active participants in virtually every one of the civil wars fought on the continent. And far from being absent when violent conflicts spontaneously break out, African governments are often deeply implicated in fomenting ethnic violence between groups. But this refinement does put the focus of our attention where it belongs: On state weakness, which does seem to be a bigger problem in Africa than in other parts of the globe.

An Alternative: State Weakness and State Failure in Africa

Most of the world's so-called "failed states" have emerged in Africa. This situation can be traced to their colonial legacies. For the most part, when African states gained independence the government wasn’t able to control much of the rural territory outside of the capital city. Since the 1960s, foreign donors have hoped that functioning and consolidated states would emerge, but this optimism was largely misplaced. During the last half century, as these independent states have been incorporated into the international economy, weak and poorly funded administrative institutions have emerged. Courts are corrupt, police are underpaid, armies tend to be under-funded and untrained, education systems tend to be bankrupt, basic health care is unavailable to most people, and elections are often fraudulent. In the absence of the rule of law, what limited economic activity takes place usually concentrated in diamond mines, plantations, or oil wells. This sort of "enclave production" provides few incentives for leaders to establish popular legitimacy through reform or development. With very little indigenous economic activity, the poor get poorer while a small fraction of regime elite become wealthy by brokering deals with multinational oil and mineral companies or skimming off international aid.

As a result of this vicious cycle, some states in Africa can no longer perform their basic functions. Under these circumstances, extremely small and poorly-organized rebel groups can survive and thrive. Worst of all, governments are sometimes so weak and incompetent that the military actually implodes while trying to fight rebel groups. This leads to "failed states," where the state army is replaced by rival militias equipped with by the plundered arsenals of the state army. The experiences of Liberia, Somalia, Sierra Leone, Congo-Brazzaville, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo fit this unfortunate mold.

Coup, Weak Militaries, and Persistent Rebel Insurgency

One of the themes of the explanation sketched above is that pervasive poverty and persistent state weakness creates very few wealth opportunities, concentrated at the highest levels of government. This did not mean that the leaders of these states were secure, however. There were always potential challengers trying to get their hands on the benefits that come with occupying the presidential palace, and leaders of these states found themselves challenged from inside and outside the capital.

The most serious threats overall tended to come from inside the president's own inner circle. From the early 1960s to the late 1980s, there were more than 70 military coups and 13 presidential assassinations in Africa. The army and police -- institutions with guns that that could protect or depose the leader -- took on a special political role in most African states. Politicized militaries would often split into factions during a coup, leading to terrible bloodshed and civil war. Many of Africa's most notorious regimes (Idi Amin in Uganda and the Dergue in Ethiopia) came to power through these sorts of coups. Faced with the threat that their own armies would rise up against them, many African leaders cut funding to starve their military, keeping their troops poor and their generals dependent on the president's personal patronage.

Unfortunately, weakening the military has had the unintended consequence of creating armies that are poor, corrupt, untrained, and unprofessional -- easy pickings for determined rebel groups and guerillas who are prepared to wage wars of secession, or insurgencies to take over the country. In some cases, rural areas pushed for independence or autonomy so that they could access the resources (e.g., oil, minerals, diamonds) and avoid paying taxes to the central state. In other cases, rebels -- often indirectly funded by either the Soviet Union or the United States -- sought to mobilize rural citizenry to raise an army to seize the capital. Long-running insurgencies aimed at seizing capital city, overthrowing the government, and claiming the spoils of governance have represented many of the most violent civil wars in Africa.

Conclusion

African countries are increasingly susceptible to civil violence because their colonial and post-independence history has left their governments extraordinarily weak. Levels of
wealth tend to be low, stagnant, and unequally distributed. Most states economies are dependent on the export of a few primary commodities, making them extremely vulnerable to global economic shocks. Sadly, these sorts of long-term development problems will probably not be solved by Western aid flows or humanitarian interventions.