Civil War in African States

The Search for Security

Ian S. Spears

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Contents

1

The Search for Security in Africa

*When the risks of competition exceed the risks of coopera-
tion, [disputants] should direct their self-help efforts towards
achieving cooperation.*

Charles L. Glaser

*The hunger for a final crushing victory overshadows any
spirit of sectarian compromise.*

David Brooks

*The desire for separation always springs from the recogni-
tion that a certain socio-economic and cultural community is
badly governed by the state to which it belongs.*

Joseph Tubiana

How do disputants in civil wars—rebel movements, ethnic groups, state
leaders—find security in Africa's anarchic situations? Why do some
rebel movements pursue a secessionist agenda while others seek to
overthrow the existing government? Under what circumstances will
insurgents agree to share power? Why do some insurgent movements
change their strategies midcourse? The answers to these questions can
provide insight into which approaches can best address the continent's
most violent conflicts and create sustainable peace.

This volume evolved as a consequence of several articles I wrote
that questioned power-sharing as a viable form of conflict resolution in
African states. Two issues emerged from those articles. The first is the
question of alternatives to power-sharing: if power-sharing cannot be
achieved, what other options exist? Second, since there are occasions
when disputants do opt for power-sharing agreements—even if those
agreements are less common or durable—what explains this willingness
to share power? For that matter, what explains why disputants choose to
accept or reject any given approach to peace and security? By learning

how the disputants themselves see conflicts—identifying the alternative strategies that they (as opposed to foreign peacemakers) consider in pursuit of their security and explaining the circumstances in which they will opt for these strategies—I seek to offer an important perspective that has, to my mind, received insufficient attention thus far.

Beyond this objective, I hope that the discussion in this book accomplishes three tasks. First, my intent is to challenge prevailing assumptions about the possibilities for conflict resolution in African states. Here I draw heavily from the international relations paradigm known as "realism."[1] From my perspective, it is not useful to think about what could or should be. Political behaviors must be seen as givens, as lamentable as they may be. People tend to conduct their affairs on the basis of interests—and virtually all political behavior in conflict situations is directed towards ensuring the primary interests of security and survival. Consequently, conflict resolution requires no expectation that people's behavior can be changed in meaningful ways. Rather, it involves recognizing existing forces for what they are and managing them by channeling them in constructive directions. I am, admittedly, challenging the view that conflicts can be easily remedied. My preference in this work, however, is to help readers become aware of the ways in which effective political action in civil wars will always be encumbered or advanced by conflicting political interests.

To be sure, this approach is pessimistic. Scholars who adopt a perspective of *realpolitik* do not like the world that they describe. Nevertheless, if this approach is too bleak for the taste of some people, or if it fails to consider adequately the possibilities for peace and reconciliation, it does provide a framework for understanding the persistence of many African conflicts and the apparent intransigence of Africa's disputants.

More importantly, however, this approach is not so pessimistic if one sees political action as being driven less by a political actor's inherently and unchangingly evil nature and more by that actor's concern for his or her own security. A second task, then, is to promote a better understanding of violent conflict by challenging the view prevalent in foreign-policy circles that conflicts are essentially contests between good and evil. In a 1995 *Foreign Affairs* article reflecting on the crisis in Yugoslavia, Charles Boyd emphasized the need to understand what interests and what insecurities drive conflicts.[2] Boyd's argument was that all groups have legitimate interests and fears—one being the fear of becoming a minority in another state. It is the act of demonizing disputants, he claimed, that creates demons.

Given the brutalities of recent civil wars in Congo, Rwanda, Sudan, and Sierra Leone, this perspective may be difficult for some readers to accept. In the discussion that follows, I do not mean to overlook moral failure. Indeed, it is hard not to see evil in such behavior. From my perspective, however, it is not useful to see conflict in only Manichean terms. The tendency towards violence has more to do with the nature of the African state and the insecurities it creates than the good or evil nature of a given actor or the pathological predispositions of a given society or culture. Moreover, as I endeavor to show, in these circumstances, even saints feel compelled to do evil things if such action enhances their chances for survival. Alternatively, villains can behave in ways similar to saints and embrace peace if aggression does not advance their interests but peace does. Again, the primary concern of the principal actors is their security and well-being. That is why the focus of any approach to conflict resolution must begin with the recognition of security as the driving motivation.

Indeed, a third task of this study is to demonstrate that only when these concerns about security are met is it realistic to think in terms of meaningful conflict resolution. This requires outsiders to develop an appreciation of the perspectives of the actors on the ground and acknowledge that what appears to be a rational solution from a collective perspective does not necessarily meet, and often conflicts with, the individual security needs of the disputants themselves. In short, in order to understand how intervention can be most effective, it is necessary, in Barry Posen's words, "to think about the strategy of the other side."[3] To this end and to the extent that it was possible, I have tried to account for and incorporate the interests and perspectives of the disputants as they defined them. The research presented here is based on statements from the main players as represented in interviews, in published media sources, in documents, and in narratives provided by journalists who are sympathetic to a particular disputant's cause.

I am aware, of course, of the manner in which tactics can be a factor in any given statement of strategic objectives; that is, the actors may have an interest in skewing the truth. To the extent that it was possible, however, like the historian Barbara Tuchman, I sought to avoid making my own judgments on the reasons for people's actions.[4] For every assertion I have made, I have endeavored to provide documentary support. Since some of the events in question took place before I was involved in this study, I have looked to sources produced at the time for this supporting evidence.

There is, as I discovered, no single narrative for any of these conflicts, and the narratives themselves can be overwhelming in their

complexity. Interpretations are frequently aligned with ethnic or clan interests and, accordingly, renditions of history are often politically charged. They are also subject to self-censorship or otherwise engineered for political purposes. Given the sanctions against violence, political groups emphasize the cooperative and inclusive aspects of their struggles in their accounts of events so that they will be looked upon more favorably by the international community. Finding documents or other supporting evidence that account for all aspects of a group's search for security—from ugly episodes of violence to more agreeable instances of nonviolence—was not an easy task. In Ethiopia, for example, the democratic character of the new EPRDF regime was (and remains) particularly controversial. There, opposition parties pulled out of early elections, claiming fraud and intimidation on the part of a governing party that was bound to have won in any case. In Somalia, events were complicated by the fact that leaders sometimes fought on behalf of several groups or militias or because several opposing leaders fought under the same banner (often against each other).[5] Similar processes were at work in Angola—much to the frustration of students of the conflict there. Even at the time of Angola's independence, John Marcum observed that "the foreign intervention and factional fighting that ensued in 1975 proved so chaotic and opportunistic that its exact sequence may remain forever arguable."[6] Later, Jonas Savimbi's biographer, Fred Bridgland, wrote: "I have striven to ensure that [my] book is factually accurate. But the trouble with Angola is that every fact is in dispute . . . the facts are so contentious."[7] Needless to say, the narratives provided here are open-ended; they are not the last word on such complex conflicts.

While I have made every effort to provide reasonably comprehensive narratives of these conflicts, I do not seek to introduce extensive new facts about any particular case (more detailed descriptions of these conflicts are cited in the endnotes). Instead, my purpose here is to introduce a form of analysis that links theory and description in more useful ways than are allowed for by facts alone, and to provide insights about realistic opportunities to prevent, limit, and end violence.

In the remainder of this chapter, I introduce key elements of the African security predicament, and provide a discussion of the strategies of integration/power-sharing, domination/conquest, and separation/secession and the factors which give rise to them. Chapters 2, 3, and 4 examine the protracted wars in Ethiopia, Somalia, and Angola—situations that demonstrate various combinations of these strategies. In the concluding chapter I consider the prospects for lasting conflict resolution in African states.

My selection of African case studies, and, indeed, my selection of these case studies in particular, speaks in part to my interest in and familiarity with African politics and my longer-term familiarity with these countries. I believe, as William Zartman has observed, that our purpose should not merely be "to learn about Africa—an exercise of current interest to a small audience—but to learn from Africa—a project of much wider importance."[8] Indeed, during the research and writing of this book, it became increasingly clear to me that the challenges facing these countries, and the conclusions I reached regarding conflict, are also relevant in other conflict zones, both within and without Africa—including Iraq, Sri Lanka, the former Yugoslavia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Mozambique and South Africa. I will leave it to others who have more expertise in these areas to determine if any insights provided here have application elsewhere.

Africa and the Politics of Survival

In his observations of the continent's political elite, the former American Secretary of State Henry Kissinger observed that African leaders have "survived and prevailed by learning to be finely attuned to the nuances of the power relationships on at least three levels: vis-à-vis the erstwhile colonial power, the American-Soviet competition, and the struggles for pre-eminence within their own movements. They had to be, and were, realists." Kissinger also suggested that the demands facing Africa's political leaders were more intense than in other continents. African leaders, he concluded, "had no illusions about the grammar of staying in power; politics, in their view, was not a profession for weaklings."[9]

More recent analysis suggests that, while much has changed in global and African political life, Kissinger's assessment of the domestic power struggle endures. Such a conclusion helps explain why African states have so often been arenas for major armed conflict.[10] For some, the so-called "third wave" of post-Cold War democratic reforms have "produced few tangible changes in the rules of the political game." Frustrated with the weakness of African political institutions, with their own continuing inability to unseat incumbent governments, and with the ongoing unwillingness on the part of the international community to risk destabilizing fragile polities by criticizing electoral processes, opposition groups continue to contemplate violence as their most viable option.[11]

In Africa, in spite of the fact that anti-colonial movements were often united in their political objectives, the states that independence created were rarely coherent expressions of these same movements. Nor

did African states emanate as expressions of single existing ethnic groups. Instead, owing to the arbitrary nature of colonial partition, most were much more complex, multicultural, multilingual, and often religiously diverse entities. Efforts were made to construct political institutions which could manage this diversity, but these often broke down. To correct this failure, political authority was established and maintained through clientelist ties, the domination of a single ethnic group, or both. As states rarely have a monopoly on force, inevitably, opposition groups emerged to challenge their authority.[12] In some cases (particularly since the end of the Cold War), political institutions and authority have been so compromised that political life has degenerated into chaos and violence.

The challenges presented by this kind of semi-anarchic or anarchic situation are relevant anywhere they exist, but particularly in Africa given the frequency of state collapse since 1990. "The phenomenon of [state collapse] is historic and worldwide," according to William Zartman, "but nowhere are there more examples than in contemporary Africa."[13] Not surprisingly, the occurrence of state collapse is intimately connected to civil war. In the post-Cold War era, the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) repeatedly observed that "Africa is the most conflict ridden region of the world." A "root cause" of these wars, SIPRI argued, could "be found in the weakness of many of its states."[14] Similarly, observers with the World Bank have asked "Why are there so many civil wars in Africa?" They conclude that "the relatively high incidence of civil war in Africa is due ... to the high levels of poverty, heavy dependence on resource-based primary exports and, *especially, to failed political institutions.*"[15]

In other cases, political authority has remained essentially intact but is violently contested by groups who are as powerful, or nearly as powerful, as those who formally control state power. We shall see this in my discussion of Angola where independence arrived with no fewer than three viable anticolonial movements, each of which had a realistic chance of acquiring power in the capital Luanda. While the ruling MPLA has since been recognized as the country's legitimate government, UNITA rebels maintained control of large portions of southern and central Angola until its military defeat in 2002.[16]

The problem of weak or contested states is compounded by the fact that even the continent's most tragic events are not seen as warranting the kind of global attention that is necessary to offset the lack of authority in its vast territories. Many African states became, in Margaret Anstee's term, "orphans of the Cold War."[17] In cases where the international community has been willing to commit substantial

resources and troops in an effort to limit these wars, interventions have been geographically limited in scope or have set a higher priority on impartiality than on the restoration of order.[18] Moreover, they tended to come after the processes of state collapse or contestation were well under way, or to have been hampered by limited, uncertain, or ambiguous mandates regarding the use of force. Belligerents are also well aware of the international community's unwillingness to tolerate casualties among foreign peacekeepers in regions of marginal importance and know that a few gruesome acts against peacekeepers will lead the international community to withdraw or stay away.[19] The manner in which ethnic groups and rebel movements cope in these uncertain conditions is the central focus of this book.

Most immediately, insecurity leads individuals to find strength in numbers and to retreat into a clan or ethnic group which then becomes the bases on which the conflict may be fought. To be sure, most insurgencies and governments comprise individuals from a variety of different backgrounds and perspectives. Furthermore, a member of an elite inner circle may not care about ethnicity or clan until he or she is expelled from or targeted by the regime. Identity groups can then become a means to advance or defend an individual's cause. An impending conflict may also force individuals of mixed heritage to make choices regarding their identity and, more specifically, which identity will best ensure their survival.[20] In this sense, Jack Snyder and Robert Jervis argue, ethnic diversity may not so much cause conflict as conflict causes or leads to a more acute awareness of ethnic identity.[21]

When individuals do not make their ethnic identity explicit, their adversaries may act on the assumption that they have. During conflicts, people of an ethnic group are often "essentialized" or "corporatized" by their adversaries. Of the principal actors in the conflict in Sri Lanka, for example, Suthaharan Nadarajah and Dhananjayan Sriskandarajah write that "while Tamils and Sinhalese were politically complex communities, they came to be referred to as monolithic wholes." Individuals of a given ethnic group may be associated with the violent activities of the insurgency irrespective of whether or not they initially participated in or even supported those activities.[22] The Marxist government in Ethiopia, and more recently the Islamic government in Sudan, did not distinguish ordinary citizens from rebels who ostensibly fought on their behalf, but rather—with terribly violent results—assumed the former supported the latter. The indiscriminate nature of "draining the pond"—killing or forcibly removing civilians who are assumed to provide support for rebels—has the effect of treating both civilians and rebels as one and thereby turning innocent bystanders into rebel supporters.[23] The

assumption is, of course, self-fulfilling, since such atrocities convince civilians that the government is the enemy and that only the rebels are willing to fight on their behalf.

Scholars and journalists have long questioned whether the behavior that has been seen as characteristic of civil wars in Africa and elsewhere is in any way rational. John Garnett writes, for example, that "It may be going too far to describe run-of-the-mill interstate wars as rational and civilized, but there is a grain of sense in the thought. Ethnic wars are quite different. They are not about the pursuit of interests as normally understood. They are about malevolence and they are unrestrained by any legal or moral rules."[24] Stephen Lewis, the former UN envoy on AIDS in Africa, has also referred to rebel movements such as the Lord's Resistance Army in Uganda as a "lunatic rebel group," its leader, Joseph Kony, a "madman," and the Sudan's leader, Omar Hassan al-Bashir, as "evil incarnate."[25] Certainly much of the journalistic analysis of African leaders questions the rationality of political decisions or actions when, as in the most notorious examples of Sierra Leone and Liberia, rebels were intoxicated or engaged in cruel or seemingly nihilistic behaviors such as chopping off their victims' hands or dressing in wigs and women's clothing.

Others, however, see logic to the behavior of rulers and insurgents alike. As Danny Hoffman has demonstrated, rebels will undertake the most heinous crimes if they believe that it will result in a pay-off from the international community which helps secure their future.[26] As for Africa's leaders, they too must pay careful attention to cues in their environment and the actions they undertake; those who are merely reckless do not survive. "My experience with Mobutu," Henry Kissinger writes of the long-reigning president of Zaire, "had been that, however grotesque his public conduct, he was a sharp analyst of the requirements of his own survival."[27]

This is why attention to the individual strategies of actors within a state is critical. In his essay on Third World security, Brian L. Job urges scholars and practitioners to consider the perspectives of those on the ground in a way that allows them to understand their actions:[28]

> States (more appropriately, regimes) are preoccupied with the short term; their security and their physical survival are dependent on the strategies they pursue for the moment. Consequently, it is rational for regimes to adopt policies that utilize scarce resources for military equipment and manpower, to perceive as threatening opposition movements demanding greater public debate, and to regard as dangerous communal movements and promote alternative identifications and loyalties. . . . Gaining enhanced security for

themselves, albeit at the expense . . . of engaging in repression of their own peoples, is an acceptable bargain for many Third World state elites.[29]

Job concludes that an appreciation of the motivations of disputants does not require condoning these practices. "It is likely, however, to reveal that officeholders in Third World states are not irrational, insofar as their short-term, even long-term, interests are structured by the environment in which they find themselves."[30]

For our purposes, and as discussions of the strategies below will reveal, the value of rationality and various theoretical devices which depend on rational decision-making can also be found in the way that they highlight differences in individual and collective gains. The outside observer pursues a misplaced logic that sees a collective gain to a peace settlement and an end to war. Outsiders assume that belligerents will accept and follow the same collective logic that they do. In the prisoner's dilemma, for example, players would be collectively better off if they cooperated with each other and stonewalled their interrogator.[31] But this is not the individual logic of the disputants themselves. From their perspective, the possibilities for cooperation are present but heavily circumscribed because the incentive to satisfy their personal and immediate need for security outweighs this collective gain. Thus, what is collectively rational to foreign mediators and interventionists is different from the perspective of each disputant's self-interest.

Ethnic groups, insurgencies, and ruling elites think in terms of survival plans or strategies, choosing those which, in the view of the leadership or its people, are the best means to assure survival in hostile or insecure environments.[32] This book considers three general types of strategies. These include (1) *integration* strategies or approaches that involve cooperation, accommodation, or the sharing of power among disputants within a single state; (2) *domination* strategies or approaches in which one group assumes a dominant or hegemonic position relative to others or which involve the conquest, neutralization or elimination of adversaries; and, finally, (3) *separation* strategies or approaches that involve secession and the erection of formal state barriers between disputants. These can be discussed each in turn.

Survival Strategies in African States

Strategies of Integration, Cooperation, and Power-Sharing

Post-conflict environments can allow varying arrangements and degrees of cooperation and integration. These can range from highly integrative approaches such as power-sharing, which require significant amounts of cooperation, to competitive multiparty elections and federalism, which require considerably less.[33] In each case, however, former belligerents are opting for non-violent ways to manage their differences.

Power-sharing is one answer to Africa's security predicament, and it is one that has been frequently advocated by scholars and practitioners alike. By giving all—or the most significant—parties a slice of power, inclusive agreements lower the political stakes in conflicts and provide an equitable solution to the question of "who rules?"[34] For the disputants themselves, power-sharing is also an attractive option, because it solves the enduring problem that minorities face in divided societies where voting patterns reflect ethnic lines; that is, where they are doomed to exclusion by the fact that they can never acquire sufficient votes to win office.[35] From the perspective of the international community, power-sharing is also appealing because it does not require that decisions be made on the legitimacy of each disputant's motives.[36] Instead, it merely assumes that conflicts arise from parties being denied their legitimate rights to representation and autonomy.[37] Indeed, exclusion from power is frequently cited as the principal reason for taking up arms in Africa and elsewhere. If it is true that political actors are compelled to act aggressively only because their exclusion from power leaves them with no other option, then it is difficult to imagine solutions to violent conflict other than power-sharing. In fact, inclusive coalitions have long been a fundamental feature of the African political landscape. Regimes are often dependent on the careful construction of clientelist networks that incorporate a sufficient number of representatives from different ethnic groups and regions in their respective governments.[38]

Requisite for power-sharing to function is that adversaries actually want such a system, have an interest in its success, and be willing to cooperate with other ethnic elites. As Arend Lijphart has observed in his discussion of so-called "consociational" power-sharing, such arrangements require political elites to *"make deliberate efforts to counteract the immobilizing and unstabilizing effects of cultural fragmentation."*[39] In this sense, it could be said that power-sharing is something which must be believed if it is to be seen.