The Politics of Insurgency in Collapsing States

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ABSTRACT

The phenomenon of failed states might be expected to lead to the development of mass-based social movements to address the typically ensuing social problems. This article explores the general failure of reformist insurgencies to develop in failed states, using analyses of Nigeria’s Bakassi Boys and Oodua People’s Congress, and references to other armed groups. The cause of this failure is found in the legacy of patronage politics, especially the strategies of rulers who monopolized economic opportunities as a way of controlling people. As centralized patronage networks fragment, popular movements develop to challenge this control. Local political entrepreneurs, however, continue to dominate local markets, including clandestine ones, and use this social domination to buy off members of mass movements. As their new patrons give them access to weapons and protection against rivals, the organizational position of members who pursue individual economic interests is enhanced, while the people with more overt ideological agendas are marginalized.

INTRODUCTION

Looting, banditry, greedy warlords, and well-heeled arms traffickers have dominated media images of warfare in places like Congo, Angola, Liberia, Somalia, Sierra Leone, Colombia and Chechnya. More recently, international attention to the problem of ‘conflict diamonds’ — gems that warring groups mine and then trade for arms — has brought this economic dimension of warfare to a broader audience. Looting and personal profit in the midst of warfare, as well as in less violent circumstances, are not new. What is new about post-Cold War internal wars and rebellions, not only in Africa, is the extent to which economic interests appear to predominate, crowding out ideologically motivated mass reform and revolutionary movements.

I do not reject the proposition that economic incentives can motivate conflict. The argument here differs from that of scholars who attribute causes of conflict to independent variables including state reliance on revenues from easily extracted resources such as diamonds and oil, bad economic policies motivated by narrow interest groups, and weak governments unable
to rein in predatory behaviour among officials (Collier, 2000). I argue, however, that the variables that others identify as causes are in fact consequences of conflict. Moreover, rebellions and civil conflict in places like Nigeria, situated on the margins of the global economy and with significant experience with personalist rule, constitute a special category of conflict. These conditions lead to the collapse of state institutions, which in turn creates structural obstacles to building long-lived and politically autonomous mass-based protest movements. It is not that countries like Nigeria are necessarily grossly more corrupt than Indonesia or South Korea have been at times over the past half century. More important is the coupling of corruption with a style of rule that destroys state institutions and public order. This misrule generates a level of domestic criticism that one might reasonably expect would sustain successful mass movements for systemic change. Instead, however, it lays the basis for the rise of organizations that for the most part neither articulate clear ideological alternatives as a group, nor administer conquered areas, that do not mobilize lasting popular support, and are unable to control individual predation among members.

This contribution considers the nature of rebellion in several collapsed states, but focuses on Nigeria. Nigeria shows many signs of institutional state collapse; at the same time, it ought to be an ideal venue for the emergence of mass movements offering radical and reformist ideas and programmes. In Nigeria, even under the repressive Abacha regime (1994–98), wrote Larry Diamond, ‘human rights organizations continued to research, publicize, expose, lobby, and organize, sometimes treading more carefully while still facing arrest and imprisonment’ (1999: 238), indicating that there ought to be a vigorous social basis for organizing an alternative political programme. Armed youth gangs whose members have suffered greatly from political corruption and economic mismanagement by Nigeria’s elite also serve as repositories and organizers of knowledge and experiences of popular struggle against repression (Momoh, 1999).

Nigeria is thus a good place to test my alternative thesis that organized interests and political networks of state collapse survive corruption and the destruction of state agencies to shape the character and aims of insurgencies. Nigeria shows two sides of opposition in this context. At times, young rebels behave like social bandits struggling to overturn a deeply corrupt political order. Yet, many work for corrupt politicians and strongmen whom they criticize, sometimes clandestinely, but often in public. Some even prey upon communities that they say they protect. An Imo State journalist wrote: ‘The community is under siege by a gang of armed robbers who have formed a youth association. The gang allegedly led by an influential chief in the community, brazenly and openly carry out its nefarious activities’ (Ikwunze, 2000: 18) — behaviour resembling economic predation in collapsed states like Somalia and Congo.

These opposition groups signal the emergence of a social category associated with collapsing states and crises of patronage politics rather than
broader notions of a ‘civil society’ distinct from the (collapsing) state. Though many see themselves as marginalized critics of corrupt rulers, they often end up serving elite interests. Rebellion on these terms does not represent collective action found among social bandits and others usually associated with marginalized or excluded groups, since its aim is not to destroy the existing social structure of society (cf. Hobsbawm, 2000; Scott, 1987; Wolf, 1999). Rather, most in these groups end up trying to gain as much utility from the existing political society as possible, even when members hold personal ideological convictions and critiques that contradict such accommodations. They and their backers manipulate interstices of this system for mutual benefit. Elite backers make bids to expand their power. Youthful allies try to force their way into the social system from which they are excluded, not overthrow it. Why this happens, and how this undermines rebellious organizations, is the subject of this work which will begin with examining why rulers create state collapse and tolerate this brand of predatory rule in the first place.

THE SHIFT OF REGIME POWER FROM STATE INSTITUTIONS INTO COMMERCE

Why would rulers intentionally undermine state institutions? Most post-colonial states lacked a clear consensus on how to govern, especially in Africa, and arguably now in the margins of the former Soviet Union in Central Asia and the Caucasus. A common strategy included articulating a vague sense of nationalism, which during the Cold War usually found expression in domestic policies of economic self-sufficiency and externally in the diplomacy of non-alignment. Ideally, this would have been accompanied with state support for policies promoting prosperity, increasing revenues, and more capable government administration. United Nations conventions ratifying existing colonial borders and mutual restraint among the continent’s vulnerable leaders created what Herbst calls a ‘friendly international system’ for Africa, and ensured at least that rulers would not face the threat of invasion from neighbours or extinction of their state if they adopted inefficient or unsuccessful policies (Herbst, 2000: 97–136).

Regardless of external stability, rulers soon faced internal challenges. Sub-Saharan Africa suffered its first military coup in 1963. By 2002, military rulers had supplanted civilian governments in more than half of Africa’s states. By my calculations, from 1970 to 1990 rulers faced a 72 per cent chance that they would leave office under violent circumstances. This probability fell to 41 per cent in the 1990s as more countries held multiparty elections. Yet, rulers still face considerable threats. In 1999, for example, Algeria, Angola, Burundi, Republic of Congo, Democratic Republic of Congo, Sierra Leone, Somalia and Sudan — eight of Africa’s fifty-two states — had major armed struggles to replace incumbent regimes. Six of these conflicts
included elements of national armies and individuals who were once colleagues of the rulers they sought to replace (Sollenberg and Wallensteen, 2001: 52–64). Of six countries holding multi-party elections in 2000, opposition parties boycotted two (Sudan, Côte d’Ivoire) and forced out a re-elected president (Côte d’Ivoire). One opposition leader died under mysterious circumstances (Guinea-Bissau), and another campaign aggravated separatist violence (Tanzania). The 2002 elections in Zimbabwe showed the extent to which multiparty elections were compatible with serious internal conflict. As we will see below, competition in advance of the 2003 election in Nigeria is already a significant source of violence.

These dangers encourage incumbent rulers to avoid centralizing military command structures. They keep rivals off balance by manipulating factional conflicts within militaries. In Nigeria in the 1990s, this meant the creation of a National Guard loyal to the president, special task forces to attack opposition communities (and each other), ‘anti-crime’ units that seized regime opponents, and shadowy anti-drug and business investigative units that would use violence against citizens and suspect members of the regime, including army officers (Alli, 2001). While providing some short-term security for rulers, the long-term impact has been to distribute weapons and military expertise more widely in societies. This strategy also risks creating autonomous centres of violence, despite a ruler’s best efforts to balance and divide these agencies. The attack of October 2001 by the army on civilians in Nigeria’s Benue State, which killed over 200, included reprisals against the family and followers of the former Army Chief of Staff, forced out of office by the Defence Minister. This alerted Nigerians to the likely prospect of confrontation between two former generals, each with followings in the army and security forces (US Department of State, 2002).

Most post-colonial rulers take pains to buy the loyalty, or at least compliance of key groups. The most efficient way of doing this in the short term has been for rulers to distribute state resources and assets as patronage. Effective at building power bases, this practice also undermines state capacities to provide services to the wider population. How can this not create a context propitious for mass rebellions and reform movements? The glaring failures of these regimes generate copious intellectual and street-level criticism, and there is no shortage of ideas.

A key to the mystery of the absence of mass rebellion lies in the alternative strategies that rulers use to exercise power in lieu of state institutions. According to this perspective, expenditures on services like education and health care (which reached zero in 1992 in Zaire) would be wasted, since a critical public would still condemn corrupt politicians even if they received meagre services. Besides, this would divert resources from the urgent task of heading off potential rivals. Liberia’s government, for example, reported a budget of just US$ 65 million for all official operations in 1999 (Government of Liberia, 2000: 12). Out of this (and much larger clandestine earnings), President Charles Taylor supported his Special Security Unit,
Security Operations Division, ‘Demon Force’, Joint Security Forces, National Bureau of Investigation, Anti-Terrorist Brigade and Anti-Terrorist Unit, and irregular personal forces such as ‘Charlie’s Angels’.

This strategy weakens state institutions and the law enforcement capabilities needed for controlling associates and subordinates, so instead rulers manipulate markets to manage their clients. Rulers permit loyal associates access to economic opportunities such as transactions in illicit goods. Laws and regulations are enforced unevenly, to target independent operators and exempt political favourites. Rulers find that they can manage political networks without treasuries, extensive bureaucracies, or revenue collection, provided they monopolize commerce, including illicit trades. These rulers destroy their own states, at least their formal institutions, and replace them with political networks that are rooted in a pervasive, often predatory commercial presence.

These networks often crowd out people who have become ‘marginal’ in the context of poverty and collapsing state services. Yet, they must deal with corrupt officials in order to get access to informal markets. Given the presence of multiple armed groups, rulers can act as racketeers, selling exemption from prosecution or using control over the state to help business partners. Therefore, privileged clients build their own networks in this commercial world — again, providing short-term advantages for a ruler who tries to manage scarce resources, but posing a long-term threat if clients find opportunities to freelance. Meanwhile, even as this cuts off a social escape valve for common people and the autonomous social space that revolutionaries and reformers might use to mobilize followers, most people recognize that senior officials have little interest in actually governing in the sense of providing services or even in the social reciprocity expected of a good patron.

Since the end of the Cold War, well-armed subordinates have toppled a growing number of patronage-based political systems. This is not an indication that rulers are ignoring clients in favour of building capable public administrations. As arms fall into the hands of private gangs associated with presidential associates, key politicians and paramilitary commanders who once allied with their presidential business partner now arm young men to challenge former patrons. But it is not the trade in arms, widely available on global markets for years, that is decisive. Nor are collapsing patronage networks directly related to foreign disengagement. Non-African states are more selective about distributing aid, but overall amounts have not declined sharply. Besides, many rulers have found ways to manipulate new sources of aid (van de Walle, 2001: 188–234). Nor is the collapse of state services a direct causal factor. Chad, for example, provides minimal services, yet violence declined there in the 1990s. Violence in fact comes from the collapse of the regime’s patronage-based monopoly over commerce, coupled with elite co-optation of armed groups.

Nearly all ‘warlords’ in Somalia, Congo, Congo-Brazzaville, and Liberia held high office in governments that they later attacked, and had developed
important commercial connections as part of their positions in old patronage networks. The Republic of Congo’s Ninja militia joined Bernard Kolélas, mayor of Brazzaville and prime ministerial confidant. The rival Zoulou militia fought for Professor Pascal Lissouba, a former prime minister, then president. Titles such as Doctor and Professor among faction leaders (including Professor Wamba-dia-Wamba and Dr Emile Ilunga, of competing factions of the Rassemblement Congolaise pour la Démocratie, and Dr George Boley of the Liberian Peace Council), along with generals, former ministers and other notables point to elite origins and close ties to rulers in many of Africa’s internal wars. In a different context, intellectuals who criticized oppressive regimes might have organized the first armed opposition, much like colonial counterparts who ‘enjoyed’ advantages of far greater social exclusion — autonomy, really — from the ruling elite. Today, commercial networks of these challengers provide valuable political raw materials in battles to topple weakened patrons and to fight off other claimants to state power, including more ideologically motivated contenders. Liberia’s warlord-turned-president, Charles Taylor, for example, ran the state procurement agency for President Samuel K. Doe (1980–89). Mohammed Farah Aideed was a Defence Minister for Somali president Siad Barrie (1970–91), acquiring arms clandestinely from abroad for his boss prior to Somalia’s civil war. The son and business manager of Zaire’s former president Mobutu (1965–97) backs an insurgency that fights the son of a former smuggler who found his own way to State House. Insurgents in Chechnya — with leaders who include Soviet-era procurement directors and Red Army commanders — use clandestine smuggling and racketeer networks to get money to buy sophisticated weapons.

These commercial connections, developed in corrupt, patronage-based pre-conflict regimes, become central political and material resources for leaders who use armed youths, often from the plethora of the corrupt regime’s paramilitary and army units, to fight their way to power. The prevalence of these networks decisively influences the political development of mass opposition, especially in marginalizing people who would prefer to pursue more overtly ideological armed rebellion, but who lack the commercial connections and capacity to accumulate resources to match their rivals.

REBELLION WITHOUT IDEOLOGICAL BLUEPRINTS AND LIBERATED ZONES

In this context it still seems rational for insurgents, even those tied to corrupt regimes, to recruit supporters with promises of a new social order to replace the existing oppression. Many Cold War era insurgents successfully offered themselves as reformist and revolutionary alternatives. The African National Congress, Southwest African People’s Liberation Organization, and Zimbabwean African People’s Union all recruited mass followings with
detailed visions of the future, and they built their own administrations in liberated zones (Clapham, 1996: 222–6). Nor did groups, then or now, merely style themselves as ideological allies to get superpower patronage or out of conceptual poverty or lack of other models. The Eritrea People’s Liberation Front used the organizational advantages of a Marxist–Leninist strategy even while battling the Soviet-backed Ethiopian regime after 1977. Uganda’s President Yoweri Museveni (1997) offers a model from a highly successful indigenous insurgency strategy from 1981 to 1986, and had a significant impact on Paul Kagame, who led his Rwandan Patriotic Front to Power in 1994. Kagame’s army has the organizational capability to deploy deep into Congo’s territory since 1996, an exceptional capacity among African states.

In contrast, armed groups such as Sierra Leone’s Revolutionary United Front (RUF), the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL), Uganda’s Alliance of Democratic Forces (ADF) and many others do little to advertise a particular ideological plan to local people. They show scant evidence of constructing civil or military administrations in areas they control. The great majority of refugees flee to government-held areas or neighbouring countries in these zones of conflict, even when insurgents control significant territory that could serve as a safe haven to put political ideas into practice. One does not find broad popular support for these insurgents as there is, for example, among Palestinians for their liberation groups. But since faction leaders in collapsed or collapsing states are often politicians or officers who jockeyed for position in an elite hierarchy and benefited from ‘official’ political violence, the goals of violence turn toward battling local rivals and appropriating as much of the wealth of this political network for themselves (Bazenguissa-Ganga, 1999: 37–54). They attract armed young men who joined militias and politicians’ private armies, and who now seek personal opportunity and safety with insurgents.

At first glance, youth groups and ethnic militias in Nigeria that criticize corruption appear to contradict this focus on economic gains and access to patronage. In the southwest, the Oodua Peoples Congress (OPC) agitates for the autonomy of ethnic Yoruba areas of Nigeria. It also campaigns for accountable governance in what is envisioned (at the very least) as a radically decentralized Nigerian federal system. They count as associates well-organized groups, such as the Oodua Self-Determination Groups (COSLEG), the Oodua Liberation Movement (OLM), the Yoruba Revolutionary Movement (YOREM) and the Odua Youth Movement (OYM). The OPC takes on tasks that suggest that it has a mass organizational structure capable of generating a reformist alternative to the existing Nigerian state. Most prominent has been the organization of members as vigilantes, joined by paramilitary groups such as Neighbourhood Watch to fight a terrible wave of violent crime that Nigerian government officials cannot contain. Members take on more mundane tasks such as directing traffic, administering markets, and punishing officials who take bribes, apparently as part
of an effort to build support and to demonstrate to citizens the gross incapacity of the Nigerian state to serve public interests (Ajulo, 2000: 12; Mumuni, 2000: 40–1; Olabisi, 2000: 5). The popularity of these groups suggests that some Nigerians see them as viable alternatives to corrupt and inept government officials.

‘Our primary objective’, stated Kayode ‘Sankara’ Ogundamisi, OPC’s National Secretary, ‘was to canvass a sovereign national conference that will lead us to an autonomous Yoruba nation’ (Tunji, 2000: 15). OYM activists go further, proposing an Oodua Republic during Abacha’s brutal rule (OYM, 1994) and remain pledged to ‘raise and defend the full expression of their right to self-determination’ (OYM, 2001). OPC’s anti-crime campaign includes attacking and killing policemen alleged to shield and collude with armed robbers. A Lagos State Senate investigation of OPC-police clashes in 1999 and 2000 determined that OPC fighters and police engaged in a recurrent cycle of conflict rooted in contention between local politicians who use their ties to police and armed robbers to fight their foes. The annual toll was 500 civilians, police and OPC members (Committee for the Defense of Human Rights, 2001). Other armed groups attack government officials and provide community services in lieu of seemingly uninterested state bureaucracies.

The Bakassi Boys in eastern Nigeria also fight armed criminals. ‘Residents of Aba prefer Bakassi Boys to the police because of their “jungle” [immediate] justice unlike the judicial procedure which takes a long time and may result in the guilty getting freedom . . . they prefer Bakassi Boys to the police on the premise that the boys do not collect bribes to free criminals’ (Anon, 2000: 15). Their success at battling armed robbers is popular. ‘If you had said, “Let’s go to Onitsha”, I wouldn’t even go’, said a businessman who had been robbed at gunpoint ‘numerous times’. ‘These guys went unpunished. Now we have our own people’s law there’ (interview, Accra, 25 May 2001).

In contrast, extensive corruption in Nigeria’s elected civilian government attracts general public condemnation and contempt. The legislative head of a major political party even confessed: ‘Majority of us cannot go home. You drive your NASS (National Assembly) car on the streets (and people) shout “thief, thief”’ (Onyeacholem, 2000: 18).

The Niger Delta produces armed youth groups such as the Ijaw Youth Congress (IYC), Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP), and Egbesu Boys. They address popular grievances such as the failure of oil companies to compensate communities for environmental damage, the unwillingness of the Nigerian Federal Government to share oil revenues with oil producing communities, and official human rights violations. The Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) makes no secret of its campaign for a separate Biafran state. These groups confront paramilitary federal ‘task forces’, one of which, in November 1999 after the transition to civilian rule, demolished Odi, a Bayelsa State town of 15,000, and killed dozens of civilians (Human Rights Watch, 1999: 3).
Incumbent politicians and administrators take seriously the threat to the country's political hierarchy that is posed by the vision that OPC and groups like them. Some government officials claim that these youth groups recruit 'criminals who parade themselves as youth activists' and who are really interested in loot and extortion, rather than political programmes (Abugu, 2000: 2). Yet, there is political consistency in many actions. Youths in the south have taken the lead in attacking installations of foreign oil producers, which they accuse of financing and arming regional paramilitaries (Perouse de Montclos, 1999: 20–38).

Despite the economic opportunities associated with violence in these, as in all conflicts, these groups appear to be good candidates to become revolutionary mass movements. Eric Wolf observed of rural revolutionaries that ‘ultimately, the decisive factor in making a peasant rebellion possible lies in the relation of the peasantry to the field of power surrounding it’, and they must have ‘fields of leverage’. That is, marginalization from centres of power translates into organizational autonomy, while clandestine activities offer avenues for gathering resources to promote struggle and build followings (Wolf, 1999: 290). Group solidarity and resources ought to be present in Nigeria, as in many African states where regimes are not only oppressive, but also place low priorities on administrative capabilities outside coercive agencies. Radical and reform-minded intellectuals abound, products of Nigeria's extensive university system, and are among those who now support themselves in non-government organizations, seeking money and intellectual ties with support groups from abroad and exiled Nigerians, just the sorts of resources needed to challenge corrupt and predatory rulers seem available.

YOUTH VIOLENCE AND ELITE POLITICAL COMPETITION

Closer investigation of Nigeria’s ‘field of leverage’ reveals numerous informal linkages between armed opposition groups and elite political networks. These linkages reinforce economic elements of political relationships much as patronage-based political authority integrates commerce into networks that grow increasingly violent over time and crowd out organizational alternatives. The social origins of group members highlight this linkage. A journalist observes of the Bakassi Boys that ‘a good number of these boys were also used for some of the dirty jobs carried out during the Abacha reign of terror, and they are all moving about freely, ready for the highest bidder to engage their services’ (Agekameh, 2000b: 25). Some vigilantes allegedly recruit demobilized Nigerian soldiers that served in the ECOMAS Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) in Liberia and Sierra Leone. Other soldiers return with weapons, which they sell illegally to others or keep for their own purposes (interview with western military observer, Freetown, Sierra Leone, 9 May 2001). Demobilized paramilitaries and security agencies formed
during General Sani Abacha’s regime contributed to the weaponry and military experts available to these groups. Both Abacha and his predecessor, Ibrahim Babangida, formed private armies for their self-succession bids. After they failed, there is no record of what happened to their weapons, though army officers report that private individuals appear on bases to buy weapons (Agekameh, 2001: 32).

A journalist observed that Bakassi Boys treat suspected criminals harshly, that ‘judgment takes the form first of cutting off the hand from the elbow known as “short sleeve” or from the shoulders known as “long sleeve”’, echoing techniques of RUF fighters that ECOMOG encountered in Sierra Leone (Agekameh, 2000a: 24–5; Ubani, 2000: 10). Colourful posters with titles like ‘The face up between the Bakassi Boys and Federal Government troops at Onitsha’ depict machete-wielding fighters defying federal authorities. Popular videos such as Issa Kaba – Bakassi Boys show members disparaging bumbling and corrupt judges and criminal courts, preferring instead the summary justice of ‘African science’, or judgment of a captive’s guilt by holding up a special machete. If it turns red (visible only to the adept in real life and to the video viewer), the execution tool is used.

Targets and uses of violence also highlight significant attachments between incumbent elites and Bakassi Boys in the context of local factional rivalries and federal–local conflicts for control of resources. Governor Chimaroke Mbadinuju of Anambra State invited the Bakassi Boys to rid his state’s commercial centre of Onitsha of armed robbers. The Abia State governor also invited Bakassi Boys to his state (Ojeme, 2000: 1). As the businessman above observed, armed robbery decreased in Onitsha as Bakassi Boys killed suspected criminals. The Anambra State legislature legalized these activities under a State Vigilante Service Committee answerable to the governor and Abia’s state government followed suit with an Abia State Vigilante Service (Agekameh, 2000a: 23–7). In both of these states, these parallel enforcement bodies clashed with existing federal agencies. They played into local governors’ efforts to take over responsibilities legally reserved for the federal government, a battle in which the Anambra governor warned ‘people will die’ (Agbo, 2002: 36).

The Bakassi Boys fight other political battles of their incumbent politician patrons too. The group allegedly killed Ikechukwu, a political opponent of the Anambra governor, and Nwosu-Igbo, an Abia State opposition politician, and threatened to kill a member of the Anambra legislature before police intervened. Anambra Governor Mbadinuju justified the Bakassi Boys’ actions, saying:

They came to me and said that they have been looking for this man (legislator) . . . and that they had gone to his house to catch him because he (legislator) committed criminal offenses and I said no matter how highly placed a person is, anyone who is suspected of being an armed robber, we will bring him out and test him, so they (Bakassi Boys) tested him (legislator) as they normally test everybody and he didn’t meet up with the test. (Onwubiko, 2000: 11)
The governor appropriated the rhetoric of anti-corruption to justify the Bakassi Boys’ actions, stating that his opponent ‘showed undue loyalty to some “money bags” who had sworn to destabilize state government’ (Eke, 2000: 8). Likewise, the murdered Abia politician ‘made confessional statements acknowledging his misdeeds before he was killed’ (Akparanta, 2000: 17). Elsewhere, the ECOMOG militia (named for Nigerian expeditionary forces in Sierra Leone and Liberia) in Yobe State found favour with its governor. The governor claimed that he used the group for ‘eradicating corruption and oppression’, though critics said that it was a tool to intimidate political opponents (Ali, 2000: 45). At the level of rhetoric, reformist and radical inclinations of individual Bakassi Boys members are thus compatible with serving at least some politicians who are implicated in these vices, if only to battle other politicians who are also corrupt.

The Anambra incident also highlights a dispute between a businessman, a market association, and a motorcycle taxi regulatory body against the state government and a rival market association. The kidnapped Anambra legislator championed the aggrieved commercial organizations that had lost their patron in state government during the 1999 election that Mbadinuju won (Okebalama, 2000: 11). The detained opposition party legislator continued to defend the aggrieved groups’ interests in the state, but then the governor used Bakassi Boys to intimidate the legislator, who he feared was using connections to market associations to raise money to run for governor in 2003. Subsequent political killings at the hands of Bakassi Boys point to longer-term political manoeuvring among politician backers. On 18 February 2001, a Bakassi Boys unit killed the Anambra State head of the opposition All People’s Party, suggesting that violent electioneering for the 2003 vote was well underway.

The Abia incident, as in Anambra, undermined the ideological discipline of the local Bakassi Boys. As powerful patrons played a growing role in the group’s access to resources, ‘the leadership of the group was soon embroiled in a bitter tussle over who would take ownership of the sleek silver colour Mercedes Benz car belonging to Nwosu-Igbo’ (Akparanta, 2000: 17). Matters got worse as a political rival of the Abia governor appeared in the state capital with members of MASSOB, the Delta region separatist group, after which Bakassi Boys burned the rival’s family home. The head of the Abia State Vigilante Services complained of the effect this had on the Bakassi Boys’ goals and unity. ‘We want the government to relocate us to a camp’, he urged, ‘so that we can use regimental system to maintain discipline. . . Politicians are interfering with everything, lobbying this group against that group’ (Agbo, 2001: 63). The opposite occurred as politicians used their control over commerce and opportunities to loot to recruit these youths, or at least those in the organization willing to make this compromise. This destroys conventional avenues for organizational autonomy to build social movements and articulate ideologies of liberation, especially if the broader community perceives these youths as tools of a predatory political class.
In contrast to these tight connections between Bakassi Boys and local elites, the OPC has become an important player in its own right in regional politics. Unlike Bakassi Boys, OPC appeared in the mid-1990s during the Abacha regime around agendas not only of exiled and marginalized politicians, but also of a broader societal agenda to protect the interests of the Yoruba ethnic community. The group opposed Abacha’s rejection of the results of the 12 June 1993 presidential election, which M. K. O. Abiola, a Yoruba politician and businessman, was widely considered to have won. Impoverished Lagos ‘area boys’ who later became OPC leaders played key roles in organizing mass civil disobedience, the boycott of the May 1994 election, and the Campaign for Democracy’s (CD) struggle against military rule before Abacha died in 1998. The OPC then split. Moderate leaders tolerate the government of Olusegun Obasanjo, the elected civilian successor to Abacha’s military regime. The leadership of a radical wing, which includes CD members who were in exile preparing for armed struggle in 1998, opposes collaboration with Obasanjo’s government. They argue for a wholesale renegotiation of southwestern Nigeria’s relationship with the Nigerian federation, and the option of autonomy.

The OPC thus reflects factional splits within the Alliance for Democracy (AD), an opposition party that draws support from Yoruba voters in the country’s southwest. This split mirrors divisions among elites in the southwest over how to deal with the political survival of politicians who had collaborated with the Abacha regime, some of whom have aspirations for the 2003 election. These factions echo political debates in the 1960s among politicians who argued for closer collaboration with elites from other regions of Nigeria, versus those favouring greater autonomy for the southwest. Thus, OPC factional alignments become easily integrated into enduring political divides, especially as the post-Abacha federal government integrated many Yoruba politicians back into its political networks, and the 2003 election holds out prospects for great wealth and power for winners.

Thus OPC began as a group more closely linked to core political issues and (during the Abacha dictatorship) a more visibly oppositional political elite that was distanced from the informal networks and rackets of rule, in contrast to Bakassi Boys patrons. As among Bakassi Boys, OPC groups align themselves with local market organizations. Here one finds linkages to key figures, although the elderly and powerful Lagos market association boss (and mother of the state governor), Madam Tinubu, owes her power and prestige more to her status reaching back to the colonial era, rather than longstanding ties to politicians in the capital. Her social status reinforces the social space of OPC to create a mass movement, compared to Bakassi Boys, since this local patronage is somewhat more distant from the predatory patronage-based state. Thus, it is not cross-border and clandestine rackets in and of themselves that cause predatory conflict and political fragmentation, as Collier (2000) and others propose. Rather, it is the relation of patronage to power and state collapse that shapes this social space of mass rebellion.
This is no liberal alternative, however. Both factions of OPC invade markets that are controlled by ‘outsider’ ethnic groups (Olukunle, 2000: 1–2; Alli, 2000: 6). According to a recent survey (Akinyele, 2001: 627), these activities and direct confrontations with the Lagos Police’s Rapid Response Squad are responsible for 60 per cent of all violent clashes in the southwest. OPC groups also target corrupt politicians and police for retribution when police intervene in factional conflicts. This element of OPC activity does tap grassroots political grievances. Reflecting widespread opinion in Lagos, ‘Kayoade Williams, a repentant armed robber now an evangelist, told TELL that behind armed robbers are influential people in the society, including police officers who themselves are beneficiaries of robbers’ exploits’ (Agekameh, 2000b: 25). These attacks aggravate conflict between police and OPC members, while police have been accused of staging reprisal attacks and extra-judicial killings.

OPC membership gives teeth to the group’s claim to play an autonomous role in political struggle: ‘There are policemen, SS men who are OPC members. There are highly placed members of the society, even government officials, who cannot openly identify with us’ pointing to their alternative political agenda (Anon, 2000: 15). The ineffective Federal Government regularly imposes and withdraws bans on OPC, suggesting that their claim has merit. Even the Lagos State House of Assembly endorsed OPC as a ‘legitimate anti-crime organization’ during one of the announced crackdowns. The broad membership and support beyond the jobless and social misfits for OPC claims to resist marginalization of Yorubas in Nigerian society also points to the programmatic and ideological coherence of OPC compared to Bakassi Boys, and contradicts regular police complaints that OPC has been hijacked by criminals.

Yet, here too these shifts point to politicians’ incorporation of OPC in battles between federal power and states, and engagement of OPC in electoral politics. While Nigeria’s police are a federal agency, local politicians have found that OPC activities can play a role in forcibly advancing their local power against the federal government without recourse to uncertainties of legislation or courts. Legislative opponents of the Lagos State governor, for example, joined the chairman of a faction of the Alliance for Democracy, the Yoruba cultural organization Afenifere, and Frederick Fasehun’s faction of OPC to patrol Lagos communities. This was meant as ‘a vote of no confidence in the Nigeria police’ given in a manner that ‘will force other [politicians] to remove themselves from the fence on important issues in this country’ (Ebosele, 2000: 18).

The conflict with federal police harkens back to the genesis of OPC and the plan for a guerrilla struggle against Abacha’s effort to transform himself into a civilian ruler. Ultimately Abacha’s mysterious nocturnal demise in June 1998 — an overdose of Viagra and acrobatic prostitutes, according to popular rumour — ended this self-succession plan. Back into power, Yoruba politicians such as Lagos State governor, Ahmed Bola Tinubu, were left with
armed youths, some who had been sent abroad for military training. The end of Abacha’s rule greatly improved prospects for these youths’ benefactors as they entered state houses and assemblies. For benefactors such as Tinubu whose political survival in the mid-1990s was due in large part to OPC supporters, association with the OPC’s continuing opposition to federal authorities complicated their efforts to find a place in the new civilian administration and contest elections. Tinubu tried to set up a state-controlled police force that could co-opt OPC much as the Anambra governor’s ‘State Vigilante Service Committee’ absorbed Bakassi Boys. Public and federal opposition complicated Tinubu’s plans, along with his own close ties to federal level politicians. The governor remains relatively silent about OPC activities, causing some to suspect that his ability to control violence in Lagos is contingent on not antagonizing OPC (Nwachukwu, 2000: 32). In return, OPC support for Tinubu continues, as when members attacked Chief Gani Fawehinmi at the Lagos High Court, where he appeared for a hearing to compel an investigation of corrupt activities of the Lagos State Governor.

OPC activists also become involved in intra-Yoruba splits associated with this elite’s reintegration into corridors of power and 2003 electoral aspirations. In December 2001, for example, Nigeria’s Attorney General Bola Ige was shot in (a still unsolved) murder. His assassination followed his defection from the mainstream Yoruba association, Afenifere. Even though he had been Afenifere’s deputy leader, Ige shifted support to the People’s Democratic Party (PDP) to pursue his ambitions in the 2003 elections, interfering with the Osun State governor’s own 2003 plans. This controversy had earlier erupted into a gunfight at PDP headquarters and a gunfight in the Osun State House of Assembly, each involving youths associated with OPC factions. The Nigerian press speculates about exactly who was involved, as OPC spokesmen wade into the fray and warn that OPC will help settle these political scores (Obia, 2002: 14).

These grave signs of widening factional splits draw in armed youth groups as competition for political spoils intensifies while politicians who contend for power use the tools of influence gained through their access to clandestine armed groups and resources. These splits become manifest in the assassinations of high government officials, indicating the central government’s declining ability to protect even key officials, much less manage and broker intra-elite conflict. As among Bakassi Boys, this manner of OPC political involvement and alliances reinforces tendencies toward personal gain among members of the armed group. For example, ‘an Igbo boy took his landlord to the court. In a reprisal revenge, his landlord invited the OPC men who visited the young man in the afternoon of Wednesday as he went home for lunch break and killed him accusing him of armed robbery!’ (Nwachukwu, 2000: 32). OPC leaders are sensitive to the public image of their organization, as are their Bakassi Boys counterparts. Nonetheless, their Lagos area market invasions, which add an ethnic dimension to
conflicts, benefit individual OPC members, or at least put economic opportunities at their disposal. These activities also show the difficulty of disentangling personal economic motivations, elite factional politics, and mass protest in the context of the collapse of state bureaucracies when politicians use armed groups to control economic networks to bolster their authority and recruit supporters. This is at odds with the expectations of Wolf (1999) and Scott (1987) that economic marginalization, coupled with social disruption, creates a context for formation of autonomous organizational alternatives to corrupt and incompetent state regimes. Bakassi Boys and OPC do not lead social movements for reform or revolution. Instead, they parallel the evolution of armed groups in more thoroughly collapsed states examined below.

Nigeria’s weakened federal government is less and less able to control this militarization of local factional politics. Federal politicians also have to consider whether direct opposition to vigilante groups could further undermine political order, benefiting (or harming less) the local and state level politicians who can use their connections to armed groups to protect their own positions if the country becomes more disorderly. To the extent that the 2003 election aggravates violent factional struggle, the ties between armed youth groups and politicians are likely to intensify. This is especially among Bakassi Boys but even among OPC. State governors such as Mbadinuju also show how politicians directly appropriate violence in ways once reserved for those who had direct favour at the federal level. This mirrors the fragmentation of patronage politics in places like Liberia, Somalia and Congo, where state elites (and interlopers) took advantage of the waning attractions of a weak patron at the centre and growing opportunities to recruit private armies to protect and advance their power amidst increasing disorder.

Incorporation into more decentralized patronage networks takes would-be social bandits, in Wolf’s terms, and ties them to the interests of the elite that they criticize. This undermines efforts of a would-be radical intelligentsia, which really does find itself not only marginalized, but separated from the material resources of insurgency as those with military skills already serve powerful politicians who control clandestine commercial wealth and appropriate the remaining assets of the state. Those who try to opt out of this collaboration still have to face other armed groups connected with politicians. The real potential revolutionary would face the combined military might of all strongmen who felt threatened by a truly radical message. As both would draw from the same social categories for recruits, individuals would have to consider which group was most likely to win, not just which one had the best political agenda.

In a larger collective action framework, this calls into question the meaning of revolt and the creation of social movements in the social setting of heavily patrimonialized rule. Armed opponents are themselves creations of the collapsing state, whether as demobilized soldiers or as members of...
disbanded paramilitaries, or simply those suffering the consequences of misrule and economic devastation. These youths who find that they have few viable economic prospects, organize to better themselves and their communities. But instead of fighting the entire political order that has done little to serve their interests, most (quite rationally) become reincorporated into existing political networks, perhaps on better individual terms. This poses a formidable collective action problem for potential revolutionaries and reformers, since they must contend with would-be followers who align themselves with politicians who will permit them access to loot, lest others get the goods before them and leave them out.

THE HEGEMONY OF PRIVATE VIOLENCE

In its aggregate this violence is not rebellion, even if some participants wish it were. It reflects manoeuvres on the part of politicians and the ‘marginalized’ to renegotiate (and force) their positions in the state, not some version of a state–society struggle that will lead to reform of politics or the renewal of society. Kandeh makes a similar argument for Sierra Leone, which, compared to Nigeria, fits more thoroughly the image of a collapsed state. He explains how a political class there appropriated ‘lumpen’ violence — the protests and social deviance of unemployed and marginalized young men who found little or no opportunity in the economy that Sierra Leone’s elite had monopolized. Once the centralized political network fragmented, ‘armed marginals’ pursued their own interests, especially among those in the army and paramilitaries (Kandeh, 1996; see also Abdullah and Muana, 1998; Kandeh, 1999).

Sierra Leone differs in the degree to which ‘armed marginals’ replaced incumbent elites with themselves (though with significant alliances with surviving politicians and local strongmen). But international norms prevent wholesale replacement of patrimonial elites with ‘marginals’. Johnny Paul Koroma, head of the Armed Forces Ruling Council (AFRC), allied with RUF rebels to seize the capital in May 1997. ‘The Junta’ (as Sierra Leoneans called it) could not secure international recognition, and instead faced sanctions and a Nigerian intervention to dislodge them. Groups that Kandeh and others term ‘lumpen’ did little to administer civilians once in power, nor did they advertise a compelling ideological plan to attract supporters.

Sierra Leonean observers identify other features that RUF and AFRC insurgents share with Nigeria’s youthful protestors. A Sierra Leonean commentator writes of two kinds of rebels, ‘bush rebels’ and ‘town rebels’. ‘Bush rebels’ are ‘made up of young and old people (including children), all under the influence of hard drugs and always shabbily dressed’. His ‘town rebels’ point to the nature of alliances:

This is perhaps the largest category... They are in constant help and communication with bush rebels. They are always neatly dressed and so are not easily identified. They live in
toms, just next door to you . . . They work for the established government. They work in offices close to the seat of the President. They are present in all spheres of work . . . This class of rebels are responsible for the ugly state (and pleasant state) you are today. . . With just a signature they robbed your country of billions. (Nasralla, 1999: 2)

The statements of former RUF leader Foday Sankoh, a former Sierra Leone Army corporal reflect a similar interest. His justification for fighting reflects more a wish to replace an old patronage network with his own, not to rebuild the country’s government administration or found a revolutionary or reformist mass movement and political order: ‘Why didn’t they ask Jamil [a businessman] or Shaki [former president] that when the APC was in power? Yeah, we mine! We in RUF believe in wealth, arms and power in the hands of the people . . . We’re not going to give up diamonds or our guns to anybody. And this is how we will get POWER right now!’ (Sankoh, 2000: 3). Sankoh focused on mining diamonds, even when he was part of a coalition government in 1999–2000. He travelled overseas to sell diamonds in defiance of international sanctions. Control of diamonds was a constant source of friction, including military confrontations, within the RUF, especially once Sankoh could concentrate his energies on mining after being installed as vice-president and as head of the National Resources Commission which controlled mining in the country (UN, 2000: para. 72–81, 91–99).

Even so, critics of corrupt regimes appear at the start of conflicts. In Liberia Elmer Johnson, a very able commander associated with Charles Taylor, articulated a popular critique of Liberia’s corrupt government. Using skills learned as a former US Marine, he successfully mobilized a multi-ethnic group of followers in the early stages of the war. After the popular commander was shot under mysterious circumstances, a local rumour held that Taylor had found Johnson’s popularity and success in mobilizing people threatening. Likewise, several Sierra Leone student radicals who left for exile in Libya trained with future commanders of the RUF. They criticized official corruption and prepared for mass struggle while at the national university in the 1980s, but disappeared very early in the conflict (Abdullah and Muana, 1998: 179). If many well-armed gangs are present, and can use connections to unsavoury politicians to get members and weapons, ideological critics will face a significant military disadvantage. This remains true in spite of the fact that corrupt rule still generates the normal range and diversity of grievance and micro-level ideological critiques and analyses that have always accompanied misrule.

Former Yugoslavia shows parallels to this process of state collapse, protest and private violence in Africa. Armed gangs under the leadership of individuals who performed clandestine services for the collapsed regime recruited followers from among economically marginalized youth. One gang leader, Zeljko Raznajatovic (‘Arkan’), ran the official fan club of Belgrade’s soccer team after a career as a bank robber in Western Europe, and as a hit squad head that the Tito regime used in the 1970s to target nationalist
agitators. He then organized a paramilitary group with close ties to Serb politicians and the same category of nationalists that he used to assassinate on behalf of his previous patrons. (Arkan was assassinated in Belgrade in 2000 in an attack linked to his position as head of an extensive clandestine business organization.) The Yugoslav army found that these groups’ primary motive was not fighting against the enemy but robbery of private property and inhuman treatment of Croatian civilians’ (United Nations, 1994: para. 100). As in cases above, armed groups often presented themselves as protectors of a particular community, restorers of order (taking names such as ‘Ninjas’ in the case of ‘Captain Dragan’ in the Knin area), and punishers of corrupt politicians (Maas, 1996: 21–2).

Gagnon observes that this violent opportunism crowds out less violent, community-oriented political protest, and creates a situation in which otherwise passive individuals must seek protection from armed groups (Gagnon, 1994–95). This approximates conditions in Nigeria, especially in the southwest and Delta regions, and especially during the Abacha years. In this instance, government strategy was to use armed proxies to create conflict between and within communities, leaving vulnerable groups in the position of having to flee or make a deal with a local protector — usually someone in a position to convert ties to the old regime into military strength. Violence and the threat of violence in turn offered enterprising local officials a ready means of integrating themselves into larger patronage networks, and of settling local scores (Nwankwo, 1997), a tactic that Chabal and Daloz (1999) refer to as ‘disorder as political instrument’.

THE DOMINANCE OF ECONOMIC INSURGENTS

The consequence of formal state collapse, followed by patronage network collapse, is that those with the most well-developed commercial contacts from the previous regime become the best-armed insurgents — and also the most fearful of mobilizing political appeals. In this context, the best skills to have as a leader are a willingness to use exemplary violence to intimidate rival claimants to commercial resources, and a preference for supporters who are also primarily motivated by economic gain. Thus the most typical supporters are young men (and some young women) who use violence and disorder to enrich themselves. They are the most vigorous segments of most societies, yet in precarious positions in collapsing economies in corrupt states where presidential cronies control even clandestine commerce. Many conclude that possessing a gun and the support of a local strongman offer them the best chance to remedy their difficulties. Economic interest is thus joined to the political, since personal gain is compatible with settling scores and acting against local injustices, at least at the individual level.

Youths who become fighters may have any number of grievances that could become instrumental, depending upon the overall context of the
conflict. They can still hate the regime that their new patron once served and can articulate a sophisticated critique of its politics. They may recognize that the success of their organization will not bring economic development and peace. But they may conclude that it is safer right now to be associated with those with guns rather than be the victim. Personal gain amidst great poverty is not inconsequential either. A refugee from Liberia’s war in the 1990s summed up the calculation of opportunity he saw around him as public order collapsed: ‘The vacuum is then filled by the young ones who became dare devils, not caring about death or any related end. For them, chance (and not age, valuable time and energy) creates material wealth’ (Nagbe, 1996: 53).

Not all armed groups prey upon their own communities. Locally organized home guard units, religious organizations, and community associations arm themselves outside the framework of protection from political insiders and privileged connections to economic opportunities. Private armies of strongmen, however, often possess superior weaponry and capacity to cause disorder, which makes them a focus of outside mediation efforts. Recognition of their capacity to cause insecurity gives them further incentives to fight, since predatory violence is a ticket to a seat in negotiations. This gives organizations access to the larger prize of eventually claiming State House. Once installed in the capital and accorded diplomatic recognition, they can dominate economic resources for themselves, and now use the façade of state sovereignty and all of its prerogatives — passports, official licences, ability to attract foreign investors — to continue the pursuit of political power through market domination.

In Sierra Leone, for example, the 1999 Lomé Agreement simply left RUF leaders in a position to more efficiently mine diamonds in territory they held, coupled with greater international tolerance of RUF leader Foday Sankoh’s diamond selling forays abroad. In ‘peace’, as in war, this category of insurgent shows no interest in administering areas they control. For example, international recognition of Liberia’s Charles Taylor as a consequence of a 1997 agreement and election allowed Taylor to violently remove his rivals. His recognition as President gives him the legal standing to sign agreements with a large Malaysian timber operation. As during the war (but now more efficiently) Taylor converts the country’s remaining rain forests into cash under his personal control, and uses it to buy guns, fend off rivals, and extend his control over economically valuable territory in the territories of neighbouring states (UN, 2002).

An unplanned consequence of such a peace is that it hobbles efforts of other community-based critics of corruption and misrule. It consolidates predators’ control over states and renders unlikely any prospect that these regimes will develop administrative apparatuses, or any real interest in controlling violent exploitation of economic opportunities. Ultimately, the key variable inhibiting the appearance of reformist or revolutionary mass movements is the continuation of this militarization of patronage networks
in the context of the collapse of formal state institutions. This process destroys the social space that would otherwise harbour an alternative to this domination. This analysis poses serious challenges not only to the societies that are plagued with this specific type of misrule. It is a challenge for international and other mediators, since it requires distinguishing between governance and pretences to governance, and recognition that the former does not always coincide with the latter. This would be a difficult change since it requires outsiders to act according to an analysis of which organizations pursue goals of creating a viable alternative to oppression and those which do not, a step that would violate most of the rules of sovereign non-interference and neutrality of outside referees.

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