

African PCCs and Economics

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NEIL RENIC, MAR 28 2012

The continent of Africa is a religiously, ethnically and culturally heterogeneous region of great complexity. For many in the West, however, the predominant image of contemporary Africa is of a region consumed by internecine violence and ethnic division. Given Africa's current plight, whereby close to half of the continent's fifty-three states host an active or recently ended conflict (Gettleman 2010: 73), this viewpoint is perhaps unsurprising. Attempts to explain the prevalence of African conflicts following decolonisation have led to highly divergent theories. For many, Post-Colonial Conflicts (PCCs) represent an atavistic retreat to cultural and 'tribalistic' forms of identity, with violence undertaken to achieve 'primitive ends' (Kaplan 1994: 73; Black 2003: 122; Huntington 1993: 22; Brooke 1988: 1).

These viewpoints, however, have been increasingly challenged by those who stress the rational and economic dimensions of contemporary conflicts within Africa. This essay will explore the dimensions of African PCCs, arguing that economic factors are central to the genesis, progression and resolution of these conflicts. This will be done by first examining the impact of European colonialism within Africa. The importance of economic factors in causing and influencing PCCs will next be highlighted. Additionally, African natural resource conflicts, as well as the complicity of the international community will be analysed. Lastly, strategies for resolving economically driven PCCs will be explored.

The colonisation of Africa during the 19th and 20th centuries by European powers irrevocably altered the political and social framework of the continent. The father of political realism, Thucydides, once stated that 'large nations do what they wish, while small nations accept what they must' (cited in Chomsky 2003: 16). Perhaps at no time in human history was this more evident than during the European 'Scramble for Africa'. This literal race between imperialist powers triggered a thirty-five year period of violently imposed territory acquisition, concluding with over thirty colonies, ten million square miles, and 110 million individuals being claimed by European colonisers (cited in O'Brien and Williams 2004: 95). In order to accurately assess the economic dimensions of PCCs, it is necessary to first examine the legacy of this colonial period.

Adesoji claims that the cultural denigration that characterised European occupation resulted in a total reconfiguration of the existing political and social structures within African nations (2005: 2). The clearest example of this was the restructuring of African state borders by European powers. The direct consequence of rapidly imposing territorial boundaries that gave primacy to European geopolitics over existing indigenous ethno-cultural group distinctions, however, was the disintegration of stable African tribal systems (Pallister 1977: 96). The British colonisation of Nigeria, as well as Kenya, highlighted clearly the problematic legacy that resulted from this arbitrary form of state creation. Both in Kenya (Human Rights Watch 2008: 3) and Nigeria (Adesoji 2005: 3), the formalisation of state borders that overlooked pre-colonial realities contributed to immediate and lasting conflict between various ethnic groups.

Complicating this policy further was the ethnic stratification initiated and promoted by Europeans during African colonialism. When examining PCCs, the creation by European powers of social and political hierarchies based on ethnicity is significant. Rwanda's transformation during Belgian occupation provides useful insight into this policy. By permanently fixing social identity in states such as Rwanda (Sadowski 1998: 14), particularly through a 'cultural division of labor' (Hechter 1974: 1154), the likelihood of future ethnic grievance was greatly increased. The creation of arbitrary states as well as the practice of ethnic stratification would heavily influence the economic development of

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Africa, following decolonisation.

Historically insufficient and poorly implemented economic development within Africa has been a significant factor in the prevalence of PCCs. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the focus on intra-state conflicts has hugely increased. Mary Kaldor has conceptualised these as 'New Wars'. These conflicts are largely characterised by a disintegration of the state, a retreat by individuals into ethnic identity, the deliberate targeting of civilians, and a weakened economic structure that is intrinsically connected to the war's continuation (Kaldor 2005: 491). While Kaldor's central argument, that these conflicts represent a new paradigm of warfare, has been contested, her analysis of the core components of PCCs is sound. An examination of the historical economic underdevelopment of Africa further supports Kaldor's claims.

From its colonial origins, the relationship between Africa and Europe was exploitative, whereby the economic surplus of the region was expropriated by the colonialist powers, leaving Africa trapped in a state of underdevelopment (Andre 1969: 9). It is equally true that for much of contemporary African history this form of economic colonialism has not meaningfully altered. Numerous economic theorists, for example, highlight the negative externalities associated with Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs), implemented by the West after decolonisation. Olukoshi contends that the rapid and unrestricted privatisation associated with SAPs has brought about an overall decline in the standard of living for much of Africa, as demonstrated by a fall in per capita income (2007: 96).

As previously noted, colonialism significantly impacted the development of African countries, often resulting in politically and socially fragile states. Economic underdevelopment within Africa has exacerbated these problems, dramatically increasing the likelihood of state collapse and armed conflict. With a lack of regional economic development, African governments are often too under-resourced to quell insurgencies, making rebellions more financially viable, particularly as the movements themselves attract individuals with little to lose (Scarritt 1993: 262). This was largely the case during the conflict of Rwanda, frequently cited as the quintessential 'ethnic' conflict. According to Chossudovsky, the 'economic shock therapy' of SAPs, must be considered an important factor in the subsequent genocide of Rwanda (1997, cited in Hintjens 2001: 34). This clearly demonstrates the centrality of economic factors in the genesis of PCCs. Collier and Hoeffler concluded that when seeking to understand the causes of PCCs, 'greed' factors have a far greater explanatory power than factors of 'grievance' (2000: 29). Once commenced, PCCs continue to be heavily influenced by economic incentives.

The progression, as well as the origins, of PCC's can be better understood through an examination of their economic dimensions. In order to adequately respond to PCCs, it is first necessary to properly comprehend the importance of economic motives as a significant incentive to violence. Pugh argues that PCCs represent 'structural adjustment with a vengeance' (2001: 3), with marketisation, decentralisation, and privatisation characterising their framework. This has led to an emerging reality, whereby economics has superseded the Clausewitzian paradigm of politics as a foundation for conflict. The economic dimensions of PCCs also have significant implications for the duration of warfare. Contemporary African conflict, once begun, is nourished by economic underdevelopment and deprivation, giving it a difficult to disrupt logic of its own (Berdal 2003: 482). This is illustrated clearly when examining numerous African PCCs.

The 27-year Angolan Civil War (de Moraes 2009: 1), as well as Sudan, which for virtually all of its post-colonial history, starting in 1956, has been at war with itself (New York Times 2011: 1), demonstrates the substantial role of this economic war-logic in lengthening PCCs. In situations such as these, where economic motivations dominate the goals of combatants, the rationality of violence has also shifted. Chabal and Daloz view contemporary African warlords as 'businessmen of war', inflicting violence as an 'instrument of economic activity' (1999: 85). This clearly problematises the claims of those that view PCCs as a departure from reason, with violence wielded for 'primitive ends'.

Further evidence of the economic logic of PCCs can be found during instances of adversarial cooperation. During conflict in both Angola and Sierra Leone, government and rebel forces would frequently collude for personal gain, engaging in trade, business deals and the sale of weapons (Vines 1996: 14; Nitzschke and Studdard 2006: 225). This highlights a troubling aspect of many African PCCs. In situations whereby financial gain is dependent on the

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continuation of violence, a succession of hostilities seems increasingly less likely. This also has significant implications for the treatment of civilians, in PCCs. Warlord regimes are most often based on either 'predatory' and 'parasitic' war economies. While 'predatory' economies are defined by chronic violence, coercive labour practices and despoliation; 'parasitic' economies are generally more stable, with local industry kept intact to profit warlord's activities (McCormick and Fritz 2009: 86). This information is crucial to the understanding of PCCs, as it implies the difficulty of restructuring the economies of African states, following conflict. The role of natural resources in warlord economies must also be noted.

Natural resources can often exacerbate the problems associated with economically driven PCCs. Contemporary Africa is perceived by many to be a continent of extraordinary paradox. This is largely due to the fact that despite its abundance of natural resources, Africa's contemporary history is dominated by economic underdevelopment and internecine conflict. This has been explored by Sachs, Humphreys and Stiglitz, whose research has confirmed a strong correlation between resource wealth in developing states and weak democratic development, corruption, and intra-state conflict (cited in Perry 2007: 2). It is crucial, therefore, to give an enhanced focus to the role of natural resources in African PCCs. As well as being an important factor in the likelihood of PCCs, natural resources have a significant role in dictating the specific nature of contemporary African warfare. Empirical data indicates that 'lootable' resources, such as diamonds and narcotics, are more commonly associated with non-separatist conflicts, while 'unlootable' resources, such as oil, lead to separatist conflicts (Ballentine and Nitzschke 2003: 4).

This has obvious implications for conflict resolution techniques, as well as the accurate identification of potential spoiler groups. Analysis of PCCs highlights the importance of resources in financing and prolonging violence in Africa. Revenue from natural resources, such as diamonds and petroleum, has been a crucial component in the duration of conflicts in Angola, Sierra Leone and Liberia (Nhema 2008: 3). The clearest example of this 'resource curse', however, is to be found in the current violence of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Despite the intensity of the violence, what currently exists in the DRC is neither atavistic, nor irrational. Rather, the DRC is currently in the midst of a resource rebellion, with warlords incorporating the state's abundant natural resources into a 'fully functioning war economy' (Gettleman 2010: 74). The significance of this aspect of PCCs cannot be overlooked. It is estimated that over 5.4 million people have died over the last decade in this conflict between government and rebel forces, surpassing all other conflicts since the Second World War (Querido 2009: 351). In order to attempt a meaningful resolution to conflicts of this scale, the global economic dimensions of PCCs must first be addressed.

The relationship between African PCCs and the global economy is a crucial component in their sustainment and prolongation. When examining African PCCs it is unwise to disregard global influences and view their dimensions as merely 'civil' or 'intra-state'. In fact, one of the most problematic aspects of African PCCs is their near-complete integration into world markets. Clear examples of this can be found in the previously highlighted conflicts of Angola and Liberia. In both cases, the exploitation of resources by state and rebel forces was reliant on the investment of foreign companies and governments, with warlords sustaining themselves by forging crucial foreign business links (Elis 2008: 164). The implications of this are profound, as they indicate a direct complicity of foreign powers in the continued suffering of the African people. A further example of this interconnectedness can again be found in the DRC. One UN report found that during more recent periods of conflict, thirty Western companies had conspired with Zimbabwe, Uganda and Burundi to illegally export Congolese diamonds, copper, gold, coltan and cobalt (Downing 2003: 43).

While the involvement of Western companies is clearly a concern, it is also important to address the negative impact well-intended foreign involvement can have on African PCCs. One of the most destructive consequences of African PCCs are their effect on food security, disrupting traditional agriculture and separating whole segments of a local population from food supplies (USAID 1995: 11). This has predictably led to an emphasis on foreign aid as a means to alleviate suffering. Evidence suggests, however, that foreign aid can often have an inverse effect, worsening the plight of individuals and prolonging PCCs. Foreign aid in the past has frequently strengthened the position of African warlords, allowing them to self-finance in ways other than plundering, by providing them with large flows of funds (Jean and Rufin 1996, cited in Ballentine and Nitzschke 2005: 2; Majid 2003: 2). This demonstrates the highly political nature of foreign aid, and its ability to significantly affect the evolution of African conflicts. Easterly claims that

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by delivering aid to states such as Sierra Leone, the DRC, Liberia, Rwanda and Somalia, which 'subsequently collapsed into warlord anarchy', the international community did substantially more harm than good (2007: 23:00). Fortunately, there are numerous ways in which the international community can positively affect the outcome of African PCCs.

By correctly assessing the economic dimensions of African PCCs, the international community can effectively influence their resolution. While the problems associated with the economic components of PCCs are indeed severe, they are also solvable. Before effective solutions can be implemented, however, African PCCs must first be correctly conceptualised. Policy based on the assumption that these struggles are unavoidable 'all-against-all conflicts, rooted in old hatreds' (Mueller 2000: 65) must be discarded. These arguments invariably lead to oversimplified and fatalistic assumptions on the potential for development within Africa. An obvious way in which to deal with the problems of African PCCs is to first correctly view them for what they are, essentially rational with an economic war-logic. Additionally, when intervention is deemed necessary, particularly in the case of complex emergencies, foreign states must assess the situation accurately.

The persistence of a Cold War military syndrome comprising three axioms: Combatants are states; there are only two actors in a conflict; and one is good and the other bad (Wiberg 1995, cited in Pugh 2001: 4), has hugely limited the effectiveness of international interventions. In order for peace agreements to be reached and potential spoilers neutralised, these antiquated notions must be discarded. Another important way in which to address these problems relates to international aid. Aid alone must not be viewed as a panacea for Africa, particularly when void of long-term development plans (Slim 1996: 131). This is a key point, given the crucial role economics plays in PCCs. Foreign governments and aid agencies must understand that the war economies of African PCCs that must be transformed into peace economies are not anomalous adjustments to an otherwise functional economy, but a fundamental transformation of political and social institutions (Woodward 2002: 192). Given this, conflict resolution must be viewed as a long-term exercise. The political economy of warlordism can only be transformed when policies that include economic development assistance, infrastructure building, literacy campaigns and political mobilisation efforts (Marten 2007: 73), are implemented in concert with military activity. By combining these techniques, warlord economies can be disrupted and the likelihood of conflicts continuing diminished.

This essay has sought to explore the dimensions of contemporary African conflicts, arguing that economic factors are central to their genesis, progression, and resolution. To fully appreciate the complexity of African PCCs, the legacy of European colonialism must be fully understood. The establishment of arbitrary state borders during colonialism, combined with a formalised process of ethnic stratification, contributed to politically and socially insecure African states, following decolonisation. These newly liberated African states would be weakened further by the continued economic exploitation of foreign powers, which dramatically increased the likelihood of conflict. Once begun, contemporary African conflicts manifest a distinct economic war-logic that strengthens warlords, prolongs conflict, and disproportionately affects civilian populations.

PCCs are complicated further by their regular integration into global markets, with natural resources routinely used to finance ongoing violence. In order for these problems to be addressed, foreign states and aid agencies must respond with techniques that economically disincentivise combatants. Rather than 'aid only' programs, the international community must conduct long-term development and infrastructure projects. Furthermore, the profiteering by foreign companies through resource extraction must be confronted, and its role in sustaining African PCCs addressed. Most importantly, however, the international community must discard antiquated notions regarding African PCCs. By dismissing views that conceptualise these conflicts as an inevitability, due to ancient ethnic grievance, appropriate conflict reduction techniques can be implemented. The violence that characterises contemporary African conflicts is as rational an exercise as the violence of traditional inter-state warfare. To ignore this, is to invite an increase in the number and severity of future African conflicts.

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