State-building and Fragility of Personality-dependent Political Order

https://www.e-ir.info/2014/05/07/state-building-and-fragility-of-personality-dependent-political-order/

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After the ostensible decline of the state in the post-Cold War neo-liberal order of a unipolar world, which viewed the state as a problem and not a solution, the widespread globalization meme in the early 90s was that the state would wither away. However, the emphasis in the development literature that state incapacity is an impediment to development[i] and in the discourses on international security that state weakness, failure, or collapse generates terrorism, HIV/AIDS, instability, and refugees, among other problems,[ii] has brought the state back into academic and policy debates. The problem of state weakness and failure is thus seen to be at the heart of a worldwide systemic crisis that constitutes the most serious challenge to global stability in the new millennium.[iii]

Whereas prior to the 11 September attacks on the United States, the focus was largely on humanitarian intervention in weak or failed states, following the attacks, the focus shifted from humanitarianism to security threats. The 2002 US National Security Strategy formulated after the 11 September attacks clearly states that "America is now threatened less by conquering states than we are by failing ones."[iv] Because security is now described as a "global public good" for its arguably inextricable link with development in poorer and less stable countries,[v] security and development discourses in international relations are focused on how to rescue the technically advanced states in the West from the pathologies of state failure elsewhere. Despite criticisms and somewhat diminishing interest, this perspective ensures that state-building, "constructing or reconstructing institutions of governance capable of providing citizens with physical and economic security,"[vi] will remain a preoccupation of the international community for some time to come.

However, viewing state failure and state-building in pure security terms, as has been the case since the beginning of the Global War on Terror in countries like Afghanistan and Iraq, is too narrow and fails to tackle the problem it aims to address. When combined with local factors, such as multiplicity of sovereignties created by warlords and regional states, domestic patronage politics, and the need to maintain stability brought by international intervention among others, it can, instead, perpetuate state weakness, which, in certain situations, might even lead to state collapse if not managed well. In the context of post-conflict countries, the likelihood of state weakness degenerating into failure and collapse, and the state in question reverting to violence, is even higher. The state-building agenda must, therefore, include priorities in terms of building the institutional and infrastructural resources of the state to enable it to gradually overcome its relative weakness.

Weak, Failed, and Collapsed States: Some Definitions

State weakness, failure, and collapse have been defined in a number of ways, which are often overlapping and controversial. A state can be defined as weak when it lacks the "capacities to penetrate society, regulate social relationships, extract resources, and appropriate or use resources in determined ways."[vii] Where these capacities are high, states are, in Mann's terms, possessed of "infrastructural power."[viii] Weak states, which lack this infrastructural power, are rather based on despotic power as state officials centralize, or try to centralize, decision-making rather than embed it in society.[ix] State failure, on the other hand, is difficult to define authoritatively and the distinctions drawn by scholars between state weakness and failure are controversial, at best, because the difference between a weak state and a failed state can be eroded by time and practice.[x] The Crisis State Research Centre

defines state failure as "a condition of 'state collapse'"—e.g., a state that can no longer perform its basic security and development functions and that has no effective control over its territory and borders.[xi] In a failed state, "the structure, authority (legitimate power), law and political order have fallen apart and must be reconstituted in some form, old or new."[xii] Rotberg notes that, in failed states, "ruling cadres increasingly oppress, extort, and harass the majority of their own compatriots while privileging a more narrowly based party, clan, or sect."[xiii] Armstrong and Rubin conceptualizes state failure as "the transformation of public power into privately held and often fragmented power," although "sometimes individuals within a regime fragment and disperse power to weaken resistance to their regime and entrench themselves."[xiv]

At the other spectrum, commentators like John Warnock are of the view that the concepts of "rogue" and "failed" states in the British and American foreign policy have served as instrumental tools to intervene in the internal affairs of weaker countries unilaterally for self-serving purposes through regional organizations, such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and international organizations, such as the United Nations.[xv] From Warnock's point of view, a "successful" state in the eyes of Western powers would be one with a "liberal democratic government, a high standard of living and a free market economy, and more or less aligned with the United States."[xvi]

A collapsed state is a "rare and extreme version of a failed state" where "the structure, authority (legitimate power), law and political order have fallen apart and must be reconstituted in some form, old or new."[xvii]

Moving on to State-building

So if the problem emanates from state weakness, failure, or collapse, then the solution naturally seems to be state-building, i.e. building or re-building state institutions. But there is a dilemma: the length of time needed for institution-building and the desire for early exit, combined with the possible lack of political will and commitment of national leaders (especially if they have a higher stake in cycles of violence than in peace) of the state being built to the state-building project, may undermine the process and result in perpetuating state weakness. This poses serious challenges to any state-building exercise because, on one hand, state-builders need to address immediate security threats emanating from state failure or collapse in the ostensible age of globalization and, on the other hand, state institutions required to achieve this goal cannot be built quickly. International state-builders do not (and probably cannot) commit endless resources, both financial and military, to address the problem of state weakness, failure, or collapse. International state-building is, therefore, often done in a hurry because the intervening powers want to make exits as soon as possible, not only to reduce costs, but also to avoid being seen as occupiers. To this end, they have recently relied on local actors for logistical and military support to sustain the intervention. In the process, they have revived old or produced new local strongmen and charismatic leaders, who have then largely determined the nature of governance and dominated the political scene and given rise to a personality-dependent, as opposed to institution-centered, social, economic, and political order which inhibits rapid consolidation of the state and undermines long-term state-building. Governments that are created or even elected under a state-building agenda which seeks to cut corners are weak, less than popular, and prone to collapse without foreign support.

Excessive dependence on personality-dependent governance and charismatic leadership without parallel efforts for rationalization and institutionalization perpetuates the same state weakness that state-building interventions seek to address. Scholars such as Giustozzi have recently acknowledged this in their studies of Afghan warlords vis-à-vis state-building in Afghanistan. Giustozzi, for example, argues that strong patrimonial power is incompatible with strong institutionalization and that warlord polities inevitably tend to remain fragile and fluid, subject to a quick breakdown once the charismatic leader at the centre disappears or loses his abilities.[xviii] There is some validity to the arguments[xix] that state-building efforts should pay adequate attention to the unavoidable role of warlords, but in cases such as Afghanistan, warlords, who had long been vanquished by the Taliban and forced into exile, were practically reintroduced with US cash and military equipment sourced from the region with American money. Moreover, the US-led coalition failed to convince local and regional spoilers that it meant serious business, a fact which emboldened them over the subsequent years and partly facilitated the resurgence of the Taliban, whose "failed" regime the US-led coalition had toppled before willy-nilly taking on the state-building enterprise.

The Afghanistan experiences best characterise the shortcomings of a security-dominated international agenda which

relied excessively on warlords and personalities. As such, it was neither a top-down approach focused on building government institutions nor a bottom-up approach centered on civil society organisations. It was a cheap way of addressing a security threat which arguably emanated from a failed state. A narrow set of US security interests, support for individuals (especially through the contracting industry), a national co-optation policy that revolved around the centralization and distribution of patronage, a governance system based on strong personalities as opposed to strong state institutions, and a resurgent Taliban are particularly important in the context of international state-building in Afghanistan. In a bid to achieve short-term security objectives, the United States found it more efficient to prosecute the war effort by working with and supporting individual personalities and warlords. The technocratic core of the central government in Kabul had no choice but to work with the Afghan proxies of the US forces, who had seized state administration. They still have to work with notorious criminals and human rights violators that the people of Afghanistan want to see prosecuted.

Meanwhile, the Afghan government's co-optation policy was not necessarily always geared toward centralizing fragmented authority and was, instead, used as tool for the centralization and distribution of patronage. The political leadership in the capital Kabul remained content as long as it was able to build and strengthen its own patronage networks in Kabul and other key provinces. It equated personal power with state power and used the centralization of patronage as a tool to buy often short-term allegiances at the expense of state institutions and even other tribal and ethnic groups. Consequently, a governance system revolving around a limited number of personalities, rather than enduring state institutions, took form. Today, although Afghanistan arguably has elected bodies and institutions, individuals and even external actors, not institutions, influence policies and shape governance. Elected officials come to power not because of their record of public service, but by virtue of their wealth, military strength, and connections with external actors. As international actors are packing up to leave by the end of 2014, state-building has become a double apologia as both Afghan and members of the international community are throwing the blame at one another for the poor outcome of the more than decade-long exercise.

Conclusion

This article hardly makes an institutionalist argument. On the contrary, it recognizes that informal rules and traditions are often deeply-rooted in countries where international actors embark on state-building processes. These rules and traditions cannot be overlooked nor should they always be. In fact, some informal rules, institutions, and habits can co-exist with formal rules and bureaucratized practices. However, there is a need for gradual introduction and reinforcement of mechanisms and structures that are centered on formal rules and institutions to gradually de-personalize power where state-building efforts are undertaken. As Ghani and Lockhart note,

Institutions are best characterized by both formal and informal rules of the game. When the informal rules dominate the formal rules, they distort or subvert them and give rise to an institutional syndrome through which substantive actions are in constant conflict with the stated rules.[xx]

Again, it is true that institution-building is a long and arduous process and takes much more than a decade that has passed since this process began in Afghanistan, for example, but the dynamics of globalisation do not allow us the luxury of centuries that Western nation-states had to emerge as solid political units. In view of the international fatigue and imminent military withdrawal, prospects for the Afghan state, for instance, to emerge as democratic and strong, seem less than promising. The record of institution-building in that country since early 2002 is a qualified success, at best. A personality-dependent form of governance lacks the stability and endurance that can encourage public confidence and remains fragile. Conclusions that a "hybrid governance"—weak state institutions and strong personalities—may be the best Afghanistan (and, for that matter, any state intervened in) can have[xxi] settle with good-enough governance and demote ideals. Addressing this issue requires a strategy that takes account of the entirety of issues related to "top down" and "bottom up" approaches and that integrates scattered, confused, and contradictory efforts at state-building. The international community must help develop capable institutions that do more than reinforce individuals' political and commercial networks. They must also increase the service delivery potential and accountability of the states they intervene in without necessarily undermining, compromising, or sharing their sovereignty with them. There is a need for political imagination that goes beyond immediate security interests, post-intervention political and military transitions, and reconciliation with insurgent groups. The political imagination

should produce efficient state institutions with which ordinary locals identify themselves. Identification can be made if stakeholders are produced and if stakes are significantly high for the future of the people to rise and defend. Foreign security imperatives will not give the people of the states being built a stake, nor will a political order legitimizing the power of personalities that locals believe are part of the problem.

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