

State Failure or State Formation? Neopatrimonialism and Its Limitations in Africa

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GIZEM YURTSEVEN, JUN 29 2021

Neopatrimonialism and state failure have been buzzwords for describing a wide array of problems of the African state. Mainstream as well as critical political scientist discourses blame neopatrimonial structures for various social, economic and political ills that amount to “state failure” in Africa (Pitcher, Moran, & Johnston, 2009, p. 130). This view casts a deterministic shadow over the political landscape in Africa, where persisting neopatrimonial structures are perceived to have led to state decline and where African states cannot escape their eventual fate of state failure (Wai, 2012, p. 31). In the academic literature, Africa is repeatedly pathologized in its state formation process which denigrates its governance, rejects its legitimacy and thus finds reasons for perceived state failure innate in African culture, while dismissing historical path dependencies. Is an essentialist concept such as neopatrimonialism, which attempts to explain all of Africa’s predicaments through a Western-informed reading of Weber, useful in explaining an equally loaded concept such as state failure in Africa? Notwithstanding the governance challenges that many African states face, this essay argues that neopatrimonialism as a universal theory to reflect all the challenges African states face does not provide an adequate analytical tool for understanding governance problems in Africa, and thus erroneously informs theses of African state failure. The state failure frame itself, through a misreading of Weber’s ideal-types, proves inadequate in characterising various governance issues. The essay thus challenges the view that African states are failing but puts forth an alternative framework which posits that the current neopatrimonial structures prevalent in Africa and their negative consequences on governance should be seen as state formation processes in which neopatrimonial structures are a formative but not fatal part. Due to the limited scope of this essay, the analysis prioritises a conceptual assessment of neopatrimonialism and state failure, being aware of the pitfalls with regards to the generalisation of African states and the need for case studies to substantiate the arguments made in the analysis.

Neopatrimonialism and State Failure: Limited Concepts

Neopatrimonialism as a concept emerged in an attempt to address the elusiveness of state-society boundaries and private appropriation of public authority and goods. Though it is not a uniquely African phenomenon, neopatrimonial theory has dominated the explanation of contemporary African politics (Nyaluke, 2014, p. 141). Within such a system, elites use their formal positions to meet informal demands of their clients on which their effective power rests (Wiuuff Moe, 2010, p. 13). Over time, the regimes become increasingly autocratic, unresponsive and violent. The term patrimonialism was coined by Max Weber (1978, pp. 212–240) who used it to categorise various types of state rationalities. Weber’s ideal-type of the modern, legal-rational state is characterised by a lack of personal relationships and personal influence on the distribution of state means (Schlichte, 2005, p. 169). The prefix “neo” implies a break with traditional patrimonialism and describes a state in which the patrimonial and legal-rational bureaucracies are running simultaneously (Bratton & van de Walle, 1997, p. 62). Neopatrimonialism poses challenges to governance and institutional legitimacy; the concentration of power and the abuse of state resources for personal gains hinders efforts of institutionalisation of order and socio-economic development, and inhibits state legitimacy and capacity (von Soest, 2007, pp. 3–5). However, patrimonial rule can constitute a system of legitimate governance to the extent that most citizens benefit from reciprocities within the network. It is not the negative effects that neopatrimonial practices have on governance that deserves critical assessment, but the concept’s intrinsic assumption to explain everything “unique” to Africa, including state failure.

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Since the 1990s, and particularly after 9/11, state failure has been the dominant narrative in the international community's discourse on Africa and has been cited as a consequence for many forms of political, social and economic distress (Tusalem, 2016, p. 445). State failure has been framed as a security threat for the failed state's population as well as for regional and international peace and security (Wai, 2012, p. 29). Robert Jackson's definition is perhaps the widest used description of state failure. He defines failed states as states who "cannot or will not safeguard minimal civil conditions for their populations: domestic peace, law and order, and good governance" (Jackson, 2000, p. 296). Good governance presupposes legitimacy, which in turn is derived from the functions a state performs (Wai, 2012, p. 30). Though the concept may have its merits, it is contentious and, above all, based on the premises of Weber's legal-rational ideal-type, and thus carries an inherent deterministic aspect. The core functions of the state are expressed in relation to the Western idea of the state (Hill, 2005, p. 148). The state failure debate thus obstructs the fact that the state is a political construct erected from historical power struggles and thus cannot be dissociated from its foundations (Karlsson, 2015, p. 1), and is blind to practices that generate statehood even in times of crisis (Perazzone, 2019, pp. 165–166).

Neopatrimonialism as a Cause for State Failure in Africa

In the scholarly literature, neopatrimonialism is seen as a fundamental and unique feature of African politics as well as essential to governance and legitimacy challenges in Africa (Wai, 2012, p. 32). Many African regimes have supplanted the role of the inherited colonial institutions for the benefits of an exclusionary group. This is often seen as facilitating state failure (Karlsson, 2015, p. 3), as the neopatrimonial network has predatory tendencies that erode state structures and resources. Indeed, the top-down approach that was adapted by many African countries post-independence led to a monopolisation of political power. This slowed down economic growth and accelerated the deep-seated crisis in the 1970s (The Economist, 2012). However, it is important to note several shortcomings that both concepts share. Firstly, neopatrimonialism as well as state failure follow a circular logic: neopatrimonialism is the cause as well as the effect of state failure (Wai, 2012, p. 32). Secondly, both concepts attempt to explain many distinct socio-political realities, from the form of the state, to the behaviour of politicians as well as development failures and civil wars. Finally, Nyaluke (2014, p. 162) notes that neopatrimonialism and state failure seek to justify selected features of the outward manifestation of African politics as the very essence of the state.

Whether the governance crises can be called state failure is debatable given the "unfinished nature" of African states inherited by colonial rule. Cooper's (2002, pp. 5–6) "gatekeeper state" describes the colonial legacy of the patrimonial state in Africa, to refer to a form of government in which the leaders of weak states rule via the interface between their country and the rest of the world, while having difficulties in expanding their rule beyond their capitals. Neopatrimonial networks have survived to this day in states that had not been fully built during colonial rule (Pitcher et al., 2009, pp. 127–128) but are held to the standard of idealised visions of life in Western states. States who are still negotiating fundamental parts of statehood are labelled as failed and not "suitable" for legal-rational bureaucracies (Hill, 2005, p. 148). Hence, the fundamental issue with the use of neopatrimonialism to describe failures in African states is not the concept's saturation but the normative assumptions that are used to measure governance systems prevalent in African states against the legal-rational systems seemingly well-established in the West (Wai, 2012, p. 33). Weber himself never ranked the patrimonial, legal-rational and charismatic states, and patrimonialism was not a synonym for a weak state. Neither is there an evolutionary logic to his categorisation (Pitcher et al., 2009, pp. 126, 149–150). Weber was careful to pose his concept of the state as coming out of the modern European experience and did not intend its application for politics outside Europe (Migdal & Schlichte, 2005, p. 3). However, Weber's definition has been misread to the extent that the legal-rational ideal-type (which Western states ascribe to) is seen as key to successful statehood and that the perceived distance to the ideal-type determines state failure (Wai, 2012, p. 29). Advocates of the neopatrimonialism and state failure discourses use abstract methodologies based on Western state formation processes, from which concepts are deduced to prescribe norms of state rationality for political realities that deviate from the legal-rational ideal-type. This imposition obstructs historical contexts within which states emerge, while concealing the systemic and structural power relations in which they are entangled (Wai, 2012, p. 35).

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The idea that neopatrimonial politics is necessarily anti-development lacks historicity, as neopatrimonial networks are not unique to African states in development, but a general characteristic of states undergoing institutionalisation of order (Di John, 2010, p. 20). Furthermore, the discourse makes implicit assumptions that Africa can only develop into modernity by acquiring legal-rational authority through Western characteristics, as opposed to states exercising patrimonial authority, which is dismissed as somehow “not deserving” of statehood (Wai, 2012, p. 34). There is a tendency to reify states as “objects” rather than more or less stable political processes. It is not existing African culture that drives neopatrimonialism, as Chabal and Daloz (1999, p. xxi) claim, but the colonial legacy of African states that is rarely considered but fundamental to explaining the dynamics within which states in Africa have been constituted and continue to be reconfigured. Tusalem (2016, p. 445) argues that the very existence and persistence of state failure cannot be dissociated from the historical processes marked by the African history of colonialism and its institutional legacies. Social, political and economic crises that are labelled as state failure, as this essay argues, are actually part of a longer process of state formation which has been misinterpreted.

The dominant narrative about the state in Africa is that the state is an imported product, brought arbitrarily upon Africa. This discourse is rife with normative assumptions and not useful as it obstructs what the historical *longue durée* view shows: the crises and resistance in Africa are part of a struggle for a state formation process. State formation was a very long, slow and violent process in Europe. The developmental outcomes of these processes were not always immediately revealed (Di John, 2010, p. 22). After merely 50 years of independence, most African states are still in a process of state formation as they are being reconfigured and contested. The blurred lines between the private and the public are not definitive and can be renegotiated. Thus, in the end, it depends on the length of time period taken into consideration as to whether a state’s fate is seen as a story of failure or of construction. State institutions are never indefinitely formed (de Sardan, 2005, p. 16), with recessions, gaps and, at times, advances, a realisation that proves the fragility of the concept of state failure itself.

Conclusion

The alternative framework put forward in this essay challenges the concepts of neopatrimonialism and state failure, which are frequently used to evaluate crises that African regimes have undergone. Instead, the framework that state formation provides puts the post-independence experience of many African countries into a historical perspective, allowing for a *longue durée* view on states’ historical trajectories. In doing so, it explored the argument that neopatrimonialism explains all African politics including state failure, before concluding with the claim that what is commonly viewed as state failure should be viewed as state formation processes which are still ongoing in many African states.

African political processes have commonly been misread and singled out. While neopatrimonialism hinders a more comprehensive and less value-driven assessment of the underlying causes of the challenges that are commonly referred to when invoking “state failure”, the state failure frame itself proves limiting when describing these challenges. The state failure discourse has long been the dominant, though inadequate narrative of governance crises in Africa. It is time to give way to more accurate concepts and to describe African states as what they are – including their governance and legitimacy crises – and not what they ought to be.

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