Africa

UNITY, SOVEREIGNTY & SORROW

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The Resilience of the African State

By and large, the states of sub-Saharan Africa are failures. Of course, not all of them are failed states where disorder and violence are rampant. And, of course, there is variation among them, with some showing greater concern for their citizens' welfare than others. Most of them, however, have not brought about or facilitated much economic or human development for their populations since independence. Often, they have caused their people much havoc, misery, uncertainty, and fear. With some exceptions, African states have been, mildly or acutely, the enemies of Africans. Parasitic or predatory, they suck resources out of their societies. At the same time, weak and dysfunctional, many of them are unable or unwilling to sustainably provide the rule of law, safety, and basic property rights that have, since Hobbes, justified the very existence of states in the modern world.

This condition of failure-cum-predation is now well established, and there is little to add to the voluminous and informative literature on this subject.¹ Yet, there is a paradoxical feature of Africa's weak states that has received much less attention: they will not go away. For all their catastrophic failures, weak African states are still around. With the partial exception of Somalia, state collapse has yet to lead to state disintegration on the continent. There have been almost no changes to African boundaries since 1960. Dictators and democratic governments have come and gone, as have countries' names and their international alliances. Some states have received more and more aid, others have sunk to levels of unthinkable destitution. But all of them are implausibly still there, by and large as they were at the dusk of colonial times.

This is not to say there have not been significant changes in Africa since the 1960s. For one, the relative political openness—if not always democratic nature—of some regimes stands in sharp contrast to the dictatorships and military juntas of the postindependence decades. If nothing else, freedom of expression has expanded nearly everywhere despite continual challenges. There
have also been instances of protest and grassroots mobilization against incompetent and repressive regimes, and a rich associative life has developed since the late 1980s, which testifies to creative strategies of adaptation and resistance. On a more somber note, the violence that has prevailed in many countries since the 1990s has also swept clean some preexisting social and political configurations. Finally, many governments have committed to aid-sponsored programs to improve governance, reduce corruption, and promote human welfare. A 2008 World Bank report, for example, highlighted the continent’s recent economic growth and suggested some causal links to improved governance. 3

Yet, the scale of political and economic change in Africa is easily overstated. More often than not, elections have not brought about alternations in power. More often than not, they have not been free and fair. More often than not, democratically elected elites have failed to implement meaningful change and have returned to the clientelistic and authoritarian politics of yore. 3 Not surprisingly, therefore, surveys of African public opinion show a rise in disenchantment with democracy, and electoral participation has seen declines everywhere. 4 Similarly, the vibrancy of associative life has not usually translated into substantive reforms of the state. Instead, nonstate actors of different hues have often ended up contributing one way or another to the reproduction of weak African states. Moreover, in striking contrast with the historical consolidation of states in Western Europe, the violent conflicts that have ravaged so many regions of Africa since the early 1990s have rarely triggered significant political progress. 5 In fact, it is usually hard to identify the stakes of these conflicts beyond factional struggles and control of natural resources. 6 In most cases, they have been settled, through international oversight, in power-sharing agreements that have brought rebels and the corrupt leaders they were fighting together in broad dysfunctional and predatory coalitions. 7 It would also be hard to argue that the one significant social change that has come at the hands of these conflicts—the transformation of some alienated youth into a new class of warlords and militiamen—has represented a form of political progress or contributes to improved governance. Finally, most packages of economic and civil service reforms, most anticorruption programs, and most poverty-reduction strategies have met at best with partial implementation, and have left Africans by and large as deprived, if not more so, as they were at the dawn of their independence. 8 A closer look at the data behind the 2008 World Bank report indicates that inflated oil prices account for recent growth more than any other factor, and that there has been no significant average improvement in the quality of governance across the continent over the past ten years. 9

Thus, while postcolonial Africa has not lacked upheaval, I argue that it is in fact characterized by structural inertia. Apparent transformations and prevailing volatility have contributed little progress, little systemic change, and little substantive improvement across the board. Territorial delimitations have remained frozen, and modes of governance based on personal rule, ethnic aliances, factionalism, and plundering have remained dominant. Most important, many African states have continued to fail their citizens, depriving them of development, of sufficient opportunities for education and health care, and sometimes of dignity. Increasingly, the survival and welfare of the residents of Africa’s weakest states have depended upon the presence and programs of international organizations, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and other voluntary groups.

Although decline and failure take place in all sorts of organizations, what is puzzling about Africa is the lack of sanction for failure. How can African states get away with their lousy performance? Why do they endure? How can these oppressive and exploitative, yet otherwise decrepit structures remain broadly unchallenged in their territories or their fundamental existence as states? How can they simultaneously display decay and stability, weakness and resilience? These are the paradoxes this book addresses.

The question of African state resilience is not new, but the conditions under which states now reproduce it more paradoxical than before and shed doubts on the enduring validity of previous explanations. 10 For the first two or three decades of African independent rule, the question of state survival was not asked so much with respect to the state’s own failings. Rather, it was the state’s capacity to endure despite the heterogeneity and alternative allegiances of African societies that was seen as analytically puzzling (though not usually to be lamented). It was then often perspicaciously argued that African states avoided challenges to their existence from the multiplicity of heterogeneous groups they harbored by co-opting the leaders of different constituencies in a great redistributive game predicated upon the resources of the state, not least among which was foreign aid. Theories of patron-client relationships, neopatrimonialism, or “prebendalism” articulate the mechanisms of this appropriation and redistribution of state resources for political support. 11 These practices resulted in the generation of compliance with the postcolonial state through the “fusion” or “reciprocal assimilation” of elites representing different groups in society with the potential to challenge the state. 12

The subsequent prevailing attitude of “territorial nationalism” made sense in the developmental phase of African nation-building throughout the 1960s and 1970s, when the state was a credible instrument of redistribution, but it is harder to fathom since the economic crisis that began in the late 1970s and has yet to abate. 13 African states continue to extract significant resources from their populations, yet no longer have much to return to them. Recent literature has highlighted the extent to which bankrupt, weak state institutions can continue to benefit the holders of state power by magnifying opportunities for predation and private appropriation, and even facilitating criminal activities from which state elites can acquire and redistribute resources. It may therefore still be rational for some groups, at the core of the postcolonial “fusion of elites,” to reproduce the state from which their elites disproportionately benefit. From
this perspective, weak states endure because their very weakness benefits state elites, who face no significant incentive toward capacity-building, good governance, or development. A system that once lived in the shadow of the formal state thrives now as the formal state has itself become a mere shadow of what it once was. 14

Yet, the bankruptcy of the state (which largely results from such policies) reduces the number of groups participating in redistribution, as budget-constrained governments increasingly focus on their immediate supporters, at the cost of political instability and social polarization. If anything, the use by such cash-strapped governments of restrictive notions of autochthony, citizenship, and nationality in order to exclude certain groups from the benefits of statehood could be expected to promote territorial challenges to the state by the marginalized groups. 15 This model does not explain, therefore, the compliance of the apparent victims of the weak African state.

An alternative model, highlighting the resistance against challenges that states derive from their international recognition, runs into the same problem. Asking in 1982 "Why Africa's Weak States Persist," Robert Jackson and Carl Rosberg focused on international dynamics, suggesting that the granting of "juridical statehood" by the international community to former colonial entities allowed their reproduction despite their empirical shortcomings, because it froze African states in their inherited colonial jurisdictions and impeded self-determination movements. 16 Their argument was about the resistance of the African juridical state, thanks to its international legitimacy, against domestic challenges. What they did not explain (or identify), however, was the relative lack of such challenges to the state. For it must be stressed that African state resilience appears to be not so much a question of resistance or reconfiguration by state actors than a puzzle of acquiescence by those outside core state power. How do international norms of recognition of sovereignty translate into the daily lives of Africans, especially those excluded from power? How do they generate apparent attachment to the state among its victims?

More recently, William Reno has come close to addressing this question, as he discussed the rationality of "local barons" in failed states to stay loyal to the sovereign state and capitalize on their access to its sovereignty. Reno suggests that regional elites and warlords, who are potential contenders to the central state, find benefits in maintaining their connection with it in order to engage in international transactions with foreign firms who prefer sovereign counterparts. These elites benefit then from the weak environment to engage in "shadow" transactions, mostly for their own profit, but do so under the juridical cover of the sovereign state. 17 Reno's argument, however, deals mainly with one subset of regional actors: local warlords in zones of conflict that contain natural (essentially mineral) resources. For useful as it is in this context, his theory does not give us the tools to make sense of the behavior of elites in more peripheral and impoverished regions and in nonviolent settings. Neither does it account for the allegiance of the lower tiers of regional elites, much less that of grassroots Africans.

While these theories provide insightful explanations for the behavior of the ruling elites of failed states and for the lack of impetus for reform from within, they do not tell us why outsiders to these systems, which produce significant amounts of inequality, discrimination, and violence, do not more forcefully challenge these states. 18 Why do the leaders of groups or regions that are kept at the margin of the state or are oppressed by it, such as provincial and local authorities, chiefs, civil society organizations, rebel groups, insurrections, warlords (who challenge the government but not the state), and even commoners too, not initiate secessions, revolutions, or radical political change with greater frequency? With weak states being such wonderful private resources, why do not more local elites decide to embark upon the state-creation adventure (and derive their own private benefits from it)?

* * *

My answer to this puzzle echoes Jackson, Rosberg, and Reno's invocation of sovereignty. Yet, while they focus on the benefits of international sovereignty realized by African state actors in the international sphere, I investigate the extent to which domestic dimensions of international sovereignty produce compliance with the state in Africa, particularly among peripheral and nonstate actors. The concept of sovereignty I use here is one commonly used by international relations scholars. It refers to the diplomatic and juridical recognition of a state as sovereign, irrespective of its effective capacity to control its populations and territory and to fend off challenges from other states. Stephen Krasner refers to this sovereignty as "international legal sovereignty" as opposed to both "domestic sovereignty" and "Westphalian sovereignty" (the capacity to exclude other states from domestic affairs). 19 It is the same as Jackson and Rosberg's "juridical" sovereignty.

In contrast to these scholars, however, I establish a causal linkage between international legal sovereignty and domestic authority. I argue that international recognition endows African state actors with a domestic power of command. By command, I mean the capacity to order people around. Because it comes from international legal recognition, the essence of this power is legal. Sovereign authorities rule by making laws or other forms of legally enforceable rules. Legal command is a unique monopoly of the sovereign.

Of course, legal command exists in all sovereign states. Yet, there are crucial differences in its nature and effects as a function of its origins in Africa. In countries where sovereignty derives first and foremost from domestic relations of power, rather than from international recognition, the exercise of legal command is frequently curtailed by mechanisms of accountability and institutional restraints developed in a bargaining process over time. In most African countries, in contrast, the exogenous nature of sovereignty largely places the
exercise of legal command away from domestic popular accountability. Because African sovereign power is exogenous to African societies and supported by continued international recognition, those in positions of legal command face few domestic constraints in their exercise of it. Particularly, they are able to use their legal authority to extract resources from others. This is what I call the exchange value of legal command.

Contrary to financial resources, which get depleted or diverted as states fail, legal command has the remarkable property of being immune to state weakness and failure. Because it is legal rather than “real,” and because it originates outside the state through the act of recognition, it endures even when the capacity of the state to implement any significant policy has disappeared. Thus states may be completely unable to provide any service or promote any collective action, yet they continue to produce legal command, such as decrees, directives, and regulations, which those with a sovereign connection continue in turn to exploit.

The bankrupt government of a failed state, unable to distribute financial resources to peripheral clients, can still share legal command with them, by providing them with public office, for example. These clients can use their legal command to extract resources from people locally or maximize their own local domination. This domestic distribution of international sovereignty obviously applies to regional elites such as governors, administrators, or state-appointed chiefs. But it also spreads to the lowest levels of statehood, including civil servants, policemen, public school teachers, court clerks, and so on. Everyone associated with a parcel of juridical sovereignty has the opportunity to use it in order to extract resources from others.

Moreover, in exertying legal command, state agents typically produce arbitrariness. While creating victims, this arbitrariness also promotes opportunities for mediation of the state-citizen relation, which nonstate actors, including the victims themselves, can exploit. A class of intermediaries, facilitators, and other “protocols” arises with an interest in maintaining the dysfunctional state. As a result, the rents from legal command are widely dispersed throughout society. In Africa’s climate of relative scarcity and state-controlled economies, these rents often dwarf alternative avenues for personal advancement and accumulation. Even though people may live in regions or belong to minorities that are neglected or repressed by their government, many of them have a vested interest in maintaining the state so as to preserve their own sovereign connection, and the resources and power they derive from it. They exchange national submission for local sovereign domination or exploitation.

It is worth stressing that the benefits of legal command are not simply those of weak statehood based on corruption and other manifestations of the privatization of the state. My argument, while germane and broadly consistent, is different. I do not argue that disorder and institutional weakness are being instrumentalized. On the contrary, it is the last remnant of public order in weak and failed states—sovereignty—that Africans instrumentalize.

The essential building blocks of my argument are thus that (1) legal command is the domestic expression of international legal sovereignty; (2) the exercise of legal command is widely distributed within countries wherever appendages of the state are present; (3) because of the exogenous nature of African sovereignty, African legal command resists the erosion of state capacity that plagues weak and failed states; (4) as a result, its exchange value in terms of extraction and domination endures in times of failure and promotes continued societal attachment to dysfunctional state institutions. Taken altogether, these elements conspire to create a structure of acquiescence to the state. Because of the benefits of legal command relative to the few nonstate opportunities for advancement and accumulation, African political elites, regional leaders, and other communal contenders face compelling incentives to surrender subnational particularistic claims and compete instead for access to the sovereign state, irrespective of the latter’s history of violence toward them. The voicing of cultural grievances may be used in mobilizing local support for their strategies, but the resolution of these grievances is rarely on these elites’ agenda.

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One could reasonably ask why it matters that African states are unlikely to face deep societal challenges like separatism and other forms of collective political “exit.” Isn’t this after all good news? Isn’t it one fewer problem to worry about for the continent? Should we somehow wish for African countries to fall apart? It is not the point of this book to advocate for such outcome or to problematize attachment to postcolonial states per se. Yet, the lack of relationship in Africa between state failure and state dissolution is informative by its apparent deviation from worldwide patterns, as illustrated in Chapter 2. If we can understand why there is no institutional sanction to state failure, repression, and underdevelopment in Africa, we will have reached a better understanding of the nature of African statehood and of its developmental failure. This is an analytical issue. We may not wish for separatist conflicts, but we can still ask why Africa’s subnational communities do not challenge their states more often. Separatism is not per se good or evil—yet it is the manifestation of a communal wish to exit from the state, which is, in the end, a mode of accountability. Given, among other things, the prevailing failures of African states, the contending cultural allegiances of their populations, the prevalence of conflict, and the relative absence of credible options for “voice,” it is surprising that Africans refrain from exit to such a degree. It is this book’s contention that an understanding of the attachment of African societies to African states can shed light on the prevailing structures that constrain and condition political and economic action on the continent and help us come to a better understanding of the nature.
of politics in Africa and the roots of the continent's broad failure to sustainably bring about welfare to its populations.

This last statement brings us back to this chapter's opening sentence, where I labeled the majority of African states as failures. Some will see this as harsh judgment and might suggest that this book's argument is more about the basket cases of African states—countries such as the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Liberia, Sierra Leone, Chad, the Central African Republic, Sudan, Somalia, or Burundi—than about the majority of the continent. They will call our attention to the more successful performers—like Botswana, Mauritius, or South Africa—and those whose treatment of their population has been more benign—like Benin, Ghana, Mali, Mozambique, Uganda, or Tanzania. They will also single out the large majority of somewhat functioning states, which may not be developmental successes, but are not either catastrophic failures. Quite a few African countries appear indeed as hybrids, with some dysfunctional aspects but also part of their institutional apparatus operating by Weberian norms.

These people might well be right. I do not deny that there are significant variations in political and economic performance across the region. In fact, in a previous project, I tried to account for the causes of such variations. Botswana and Mauritius are indeed truly exceptional, and South Africa is sufficiently unique to warrant separate discussion. This book's argument is not about these countries. It is, indeed, first and foremost, about Africa's weakest states. Yet, its argument might also be relevant to most other African states, even those that have not reached the depths of utter failure. Consider indeed that, apart from Botswana, Mauritius, and South Africa, no African country has so far managed to successfully develop. Some fifty years after gaining their independence, most of them still rely on the export of a few primary commodities as the engine of their economy. Even a country like Senegal, often perceived as exemplary, remains overwhelmingly dependent on exports of fish and peanuts. Elsewhere it is cotton, coffee, pineapples, tea, or cocoa. Others, it is oil, gold, copper, or diamonds. The point is that the majority of African states may not be failed, but they have failed at establishing any sustainable foundation for economic growth beyond their colonial legacy of raw-material extraction. In fact, the majority of African states can hardly afford their own existence. One often hears the argument that they should not be partitioned because smaller states would not be viable. But existing African states already are not usually viable. About half of them receive at least 10 percent of their gross domestic product (GDP) in foreign aid, and eleven receive more than 20 percent. Aid is usually their main source of government revenue. Even the budgets of relatively successful countries like Ghana and Uganda are more than 50 percent dependent on foreign aid.

Although my argument, which centrally features predation, will no doubt be better suited to the worst failures than to the continent as a whole, it also hopes to shed light on the well-documented and widespread corruption and abuses by state authorities in places like Angola, Nigeria, Cameroon, Congo-Brazzaville, or Equatorial Guinea. These may not be considered failed states but they certainly are largely privatized enterprises of predation and extraction that have done very little for their populations. The case with which alleged African success stories can collapse should also caution us against making too much of existing variations in performance. Côte d'Ivoire was a model in development circles until the early 1990s. And Zimbabwe once augured well of the possibilities for African development.

My premise is that African states may not all be failed, but many of them have failed in significant parts at their essential mission of providing security, basic welfare, and development. One can thus think of African states in general as weak. Although there are gradations in the actual extent of their weakness at any one time—with some completely collapsed and others functioning better—these are differences in performance that may result from a host of factors but are not necessarily differences in the nature of the states themselves. It is my contention that most African states are vulnerable to failure and reproduction along the logic I describe in this book. Variations among them in this respect may be more a matter of degree (and time) than of intrinsic quality. This being said, the weaker the state, the more paradoxical its reproduction and the more relevant this book's argument. At the very least, therefore, I hope to help make sense of the resiliency of Africa's most failed states.

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The book begins, in Part 1, with the question of unity, describing the empirical trends it seeks to explain. Chapter 2 documents the unusual territorial resilience of Africa's weak states and shows that, according to patterns in other regions, Africa should have two to five times its actual level of secessionist conflict. Chapter 3 then illustrates how, despite a certain vibrancy of associative life across the continent, dysfunctional state institutions tend to endure and maintain a surprising degree of authority. Often, local elites, civil society groups, and even rebels contribute to their reproduction.

Part 2 sets out to account for this paradoxical resilience by developing a theory of state reproduction based on legal command. Chapter 4 contains the core theoretical argument. It discusses the external origins of African sovereignty, articulates the manner in which it translates into domestic legal command, and shows the mechanisms by which legal command is exchanged for resources and political domination. Chapter 5 offers four illustrations of the resiliency compliance of African peripheral elites with the postcolonial state project. They are Barotseland in Zambia; Anglophone Cameroon; the Kivu provinces of the DRC; and the Delta and Biafra regions of Nigeria. Chapter 6 confronts the argument to the reality of existing African separatist movements. If legal command is such a resource to Africans, why are there secession attempts at all on the continent?
Through the examination of several case studies—Casamance, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Somaliland, Southern Sudan, and the Tuaregs—it identifies variations in time and space in the nature of African sovereignty and in opportunities for its domestic distribution, which fine-tune the argument.

The sovereign reproduction of Africa’s weak states comes at a price, for it also alters their nature. Part 3 addresses the consequences of the legal command–based reproduction of African states. In Chapter 7, I show that the sovereign structuration of African social life gives rise to a particularly harmful form of nationalist discourse characterized by its tendency to alienate, divide, and exclude more than it unites. In Chapter 8, I highlight the negative effects of the sovereignty regime on democracy, governance, and the economy. In conclusion, Chapter 9 asks what is to be done. It makes some arguably eccentric suggestions, which I call policy fantasies. All of them are based on the claim that, if sovereignty is at the root of African state dysfunctionality, its effects must somehow be deflated. Their goal is to suggest policy mechanisms that would make the self-serving incentives of African elites compatible with the promotion of the welfare of their citizens. One way to do this is to revoke the unconditional international recognition of Africa’s postcolonies and promote the conditions for the rise of domestic sovereignty or empirical statehood in Africa. Another, which I borrow from Jeffrey Herbst, is to link international recognition to the provision of services to citizens, whether by existing states or by other public or nonstate actors.27 A final approach is to shed sovereignty of its dichotomous nature and dilute it among multiple actors in order to promote institutional competition—and, hence, quality—among them.

Notes

1. See, among many others, Rotberg, State Failure; Rotberg, When States Fail; Ellis, “How to Rebuild”; Addison, From Conflict to Recovery; Zartman, Collapsed States; Herbst and Mills, “Africa’s Big Dysfunctional States”; and Chabal and Daloz, Africa Works.
2. World Bank, Africa Development Indicators 2007.
3. Van de Walle, “Presidentialism and Clientelism.”
5. For a classical statement on the role of violence in European state formation, see Tilly, Coercion. For the lack of political “productivity” of African conflicts, see Reno, “Shadow States.”
11. See, for some of the best examples, Méard, “The Underdeveloped State”; Sandbrook, “Patrons, Clients, and Factions”; Jackson and Rosberg, “Personal Rule”; Joseph, Democracy; and van de Walle, “Neopatrimonialism and Democracy.”
12. The concept of “fusion of elites” was introduced by Sklar, Nigerien Political Parties, to explain social class formation in Nigeria and, more generally, tropical Africa. The similar concept of “reciprocal assimilation of elites” was coined by Bayart, L’Etat au Cameroun (elaborated upon later in The State in Africa) to describe how African states became embedded in society and how they reproduce.
14. See Reno, Warlord Politics; Chabal and Daloz, Africa Works; Bayart, Ellis and Hibou, Criminalization of the State; and Roitman, Fiscal Disobedience.
15. On autochthony, see African Studies Review, “Special Issue: Autochthony.”
19. On the historically unusual production of inequality by the postcolonial African state, see Bayart, The State in Africa, particularly Chapter 2.
21. Chabal and Daloz, Africa Works; Membre, On the Postcolony.
22. It is also true that many African states saw a period of relative consolidation in the 1960s and early 1970s, which recorded social and institutional progress (see Cooper, Africa Since 1940, 100–130).
23. Englebert, State Legitimacy.
24. The policies of developed countries and the structure of international trade account in part for this failure.
Some two thousand years ago, the historian Pliny the Elder wrote the well-known quip *ex Africa semper aliquid novi*—there is always something new out of Africa. When it comes to contemporary deep politics, however, the next two chapters argue that Pliny was somewhat off the mark and that “out of Africa, never anything new” would be more appropriate and only slightly exaggerated. What is indeed remarkably puzzling about African politics, beyond its surface of apparent instability, is the resilience of its political geography and institutional structures. The map of Europe has seen many more changes since 1960 than the map of Africa, where the emancipation of Eritrea from Ethiopia constitutes the only instance of new state formation—and an ambiguous one at that given Eritrea’s distinct colonial status from Ethiopia. Apart from this, name changes are the only things giving cartographers headaches when it comes to the continent. Beyond geography, it is equally surprising that the institutional apparatus of failed African states typically endures, irrespective of how dysfunctional, repressive, exploitative, or parasitic the state has been. State failure does not equate institutional vacuum. Not only do state actors continue to carry authority and perform public roles through public institutions, but many Africans in turn appear to continue to acquiesce to these institutions’ existence and to their agents’ prerogatives, despite the burden they tend to represent in their lives. More often than not, authorities that might credibly challenge the state, such as chiefs or rebels, end up contributing to its reproduction. Even in countries afflicted by massive civil conflicts, the most common pattern is for rebels to maintain the institutions of the state in the regions they control and in their daily routines. In other words, despite an irrefutable vibrancy of nonstate associations and a few salient exceptions, there appears to be little original social contracting in contemporary Africa. Stifling creative endogenous institutional evolution, there is a strong resilience of inherited institutional arrangements.
The next two chapters describe this paradoxical unity of the weak African state, its territorial integrity and institutional hegemony. They offer a reading of African politics that cuts through the noise of surface upheavals and highlights instead the stability of the African postcolony.

Over and over again since 1960, the demise of African states has been heralded. Over and over again the continent’s numerous rebellions have been explained in ethnic and separatist terms, and the explosion or dissolution of postcolonial states has been anticipated by some and warned against by others. It seems indeed that Africa’s quasi states hang on to life by a mere thread, weak, failed, and otherwise collapsed as they are. And yet, they are all still there. Although many have demonstrated their incapacity to provide for themselves, and not a few have literally crashed and burned, they endure. Not only have they resisted the erosion of time and politics, but they have in fact been the object of few challenges. Indeed, political violence may be widespread in Africa, but its goals are rarely to revolutionize, dismantle, or do away with the state. In fact, between 1960 and 2006, only ten of sub-Saharan Africa’s forty-eight states experienced any secessionist conflict by the most generous definition of the term, and most of these conflicts were short-lived, rather minor in scope, and unsuccessful. In contrast, over the same period, thirty-two African states provided the stage for at least one nonsecessionist domestic conflict, many of which were drawn out and rather significant. Most other regions of the world display a greater propensity for separatism. If one adds up all the country-years of domestic conflict since 1960 by region, the proportion of them with separatist content amounts to 44 percent in the Middle East and North Africa, 47 percent in Asia, and 84 percent in Europe, as against 29 percent in sub-Saharan Africa.

The relative scarcity of African separatism is particularly puzzling since African states are youthful and very heterogeneous; they dispose of large and decentralized reserves of natural resources, which could sustain separatist groups; and they have a poor record of providing for their citizens. African states are also more culturally alien to their populations than most states in other regions of the world. Moreover, politics on the continent often amounts
to zero-sum games, as states are captured by one ethnic group or coalition, which frequently exerts its domination over others, largely excluding them from state benefits, if not persecuting them. That these dominated groups do not resort to exit strategies with greater frequency is perplexing, especially given the continent’s propensity for other types of violent conflict.

The Surprising Scarcity of Separatism in Africa

One can count Africa’s wars of secession on one’s fingers. The breakup of Eritrea from Ethiopia in 1993, after some thirty years of warfare, was the only successful one, and it amounted as much to a case of decolonization as to one of separatism. Other attempts have included Katanga and South Kasai in the DRC, Biafra in Nigeria, Casamance in Senegal, Southern Sudan, and several regions of Ethiopia. Although Somaliland has de facto seceded from collapsed Somalia since 1991, it has yet to be recognized by any other state. Table 2.1 provides a complete listing.

Africa’s frequency of separatist conflict lies well below that of most other regions, despite the fact that African states reached independence more recently than their counterparts elsewhere and could have been expected to face challenges to their territorial reach or legitimacy. Only Latin America ends up with a smaller proportion of territorial civil conflicts than Africa. But most Latin American countries have more homogeneous populations and have experienced domination over them based on class more often than race, ethnicity, or regionalism. Their indigenous population groups are less regionally concentrated than most African ethnic groups and, until recently, less politically salient and organized.

As indicated in Table 2.2, the probability of a secessionist conflict in any given year is similar among Africa, Europe, and the Middle East (6–8 percent, against 16 percent for Asia). But, as mentioned earlier, Africa has had more instances of civil conflict altogether (forty-nine in all) than any other region between 1960 and 2006. As a result, the proportion of secessionist conflicts among all instances of domestic warfare is significantly smaller in Africa than it is in Asia, Europe, or North Africa and the Middle East.

This is a puzzling deficit. Looking at the 1990s alone, a period of intense restructuring in the world system following the end of the Cold War, subnational regions in other parts of the world seemed more inclined to disengage from the state. In India, where colonial heritage, religious diversity, and ethnic heterogeneity are reminiscent of Africa, separatism is nothing short of endemic, with the Kashmiris, the Assamese, the Sikhs, the Triparas, and the Nagas involved in violent secessionist conflicts. In Myanmar, where the government is highly repressive, the privileged mode of political contestation of minorities such as the Karens, the Shans, the Kachins, the Arakanese, and the Mons is secession. And there are numerous more cases of highly violent and sustained separatist conflicts in Asia, including those waged by the Sri Lankan Tamils, the Moros of the Philippines, Aceh (and previously East Timor) in Indonesia, the Chittagong Hill Tribes of Bangladesh, and the Bougainvillians of Papua New Guinea.

In the former Soviet Union, which provided in 1991 one of the few examples of state collapse outside of Africa, most peripheral republics quickly affirmed their sovereignty. To different degrees, they unilaterally declared their independence, adopted constitutions, asserted their legal supremacy over the central state, refused to send conscripts to Moscow’s armies, and proclaimed

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Note: Based on Gleditsch et al., “Armed Conflict 1946–2001” (including categorization as minor, intermediate, or war). The timing of violence corresponds to at least twenty-five reported deaths per year. The Somali National Movement (SNM) insurgency in Somaliiland is not listed as a separatist conflict by the Peace Research Institute of Oslo (PRIO) data set and not disaggregated from other simultaneous conflicts.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2.2</th>
<th>The Likelihood of Secession, 1960–2000</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Region</td>
<td>Overall Probability of Secessionist Conflict (%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asia</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Europe</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latin America and Caribbean</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Africa and Middle East</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sub-Saharan Africa</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Based on data from Gleditsch et al., “Armed Conflict 1946–2001.” The probability of secessionist conflict is calculated in proportion to all available country-years (n = 7,886). The proportion of secessionist conflicts among all conflicts is calculated in proportion to all country-years of conflicts (n = 1,040).
their rights to natural resources and their own currency.\textsuperscript{10} Within these republics, further groups have since struggled for their own independence, such as the Avars and Chechens of Russia, the Abkhazians and South Ossetians of Georgia, and the Armenians of Azerbaijan. In fact, this centrifugal trend is nothing new to the region. Armenians and Azerbaijanis had already engaged in secessionist conflict before the fall of the Soviet Union. Going even further back in time, many peripheral communities had seized the opportunity of the collapse of Tsarist Russia in 1917 to claim their independence in what Viva Bartkus calls a “deluge of secession crises.”\textsuperscript{11} Because the conditions at the time were so reminiscent of those prevailing in large parts of Africa today and the local responses so diametrically opposed, it is worth quoting at length from Bartkus’s work regarding the early 1920s in Russia:

There seems to have been no fewer than fifteen autonomous authorities functioning during the early 1920s. At first, local organizations, such as the national councils of the Finns, Poles, Lithuanians, Latvians, Estonians, Ukrainians, Georgians, Armenians, Azerbaijanis, Bessarabians, and Cossacks, and the Muslim councils, Kuraltais, of the Bashkiris, Crimean Tatars, Kazakhs, and Turkestanis were established to provide rudimentary government. Because the border regions suffered the indiscriminate ravages perpetrated by various armies, whether foreign ones like those of the Germans and Turks, or of the White Russians and Bolsheviks who were engaged in a bloody civil war, these local organizations provided much needed protection and other basic services. As the autonomy of the Provisional Government in Petrograd evaporated, these national councils appropriated for themselves correspondingly greater powers for trade, communications, the maintenance of law and order, and defense. Into the political vacuum created by the Bolshevik coup strode these national councils declaring their independence.\textsuperscript{12}

A similar pattern took place in Yugoslavia in the 1990s, with the breakups of the Slovenes, the Croats, and the Kosovo Albanians. Yugoslavia’s successor states faced similar problems with Croatia being challenged by Serbs, then Serbia by Kosovo, while Bosnia was crumbling under territorial conflicts among Muslims, Croats, and Serbs.

Separatist conflicts have not been absent from the Middle East and North Africa either. Turkey, Iraq, and Iran all have had to deal with Kurdish irredentism. Morocco has resisted emancipation efforts by the Saharawis for about thirty years. Palestinians have been struggling for an independent state over most of the past half century. In 1994, South Yemen also briefly tried to split from the rest of the reunified country.

Even the well-established democracies of the West have to deal with separatist conflicts. Spain has had a violent movement for the separation of its Basque region and a more peaceful movement for the autonomy of Catalonia. France has endured continued low-intensity separatist violence in the island of Corsica. In the 1980s, it faced separatist conflict in New Caledonia. The UK has waged a struggle against the Catholics of Northern Ireland who want to rejoin the Irish republic. And Cyprus has only recently reduced the tensions among its Turkish and Greek populations over the seizure of northern Cyprus by Turkish minorities supported by Turkish troops. Even Canada has suffered a long, albeit nonviolent, separatist dispute over the fate of its Quebec province, which was only quieted down by referendum in 1995.

In sub-Saharan Africa, however, where there are many more countries, each with many more minorities, Ethiopia is the only one having faced multiple significant separatist movements, namely from Eritreans, Somalis, Afars, and Oromos. Yet, as the only African state not to be a colonial creation, Ethiopia is in fact poorly representative of some of the political dynamics prevailing across the continent. To some extent, a point to which I return at length in Chapter 6, it can be argued that it is itself an absolutist conquest state, which is paying the price of its hegemonic projection by suffering separatist conflicts at its periphery.\textsuperscript{13} The secession of Eritrea in 1991 can more accurately be described as an episode of decolonization, as Ethiopia assumed the position of successor state over the region from Italy upon the end of the UN Trusteeship in 1952. In addition, the separatist nature of Ethiopia’s minorities must be tempered. According to Christopher Clapham, “Ethiopia . . . has a tradition of statehood, and a profound sense of its own identity that is not merely the property of a single ethnic group. Not only Amharas and Tigrayans, but many Oromos and most of the peoples of south western Ethiopia think of themselves as Ethiopian, and have no secessionist agenda.”\textsuperscript{14}

Apart from Ethiopia, no African country has faced significant violent separatist action from more than one minority, although most African countries count many different ethnic groups, and not a few of these groups have otherwise argued developed into articulate “subnationalisms.”\textsuperscript{15} Of the forty-seven sub-Saharan African countries born of the colonial episode less than fifty years ago, the only ones having endured sustained conflict with significant secessionist overtones since 1990 have been Sudan over its southern region, Senegal over Casamance, and Angola over the enclave of Cabinda.

Looking at ethnic groups rather than countries provides an even more dramatic picture. Of ninety-seven African ethnic groups identified by the Minorities at Risk (MAR) project as “at risk” of discrimination or another form of persecution, only nine (9 percent) have engaged in any level of separatist violence since 1990, despite the general weakening of the state that has unfolded over the same period.\textsuperscript{16} In contrast, of the sixty-two minorities in Asia, sixteen (26 percent) have committed to separatist violence. In the Middle East and North Africa, the ratio is four groups out of twenty-nine, or 14 percent. And of the eighty-five minorities in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, fifteen (18 percent) have waged separatist struggles. Although the Dinka of Southern Sudan or the Diola of Casamance get significant media attention for their struggles for autonomy, their salience hides in fact their exceptional status by
African standards. More common is acquiescence to postcolonial national integration, even by groups outside ruling coalitions. Furthermore, although Africa’s separatist deficit has been most paradoxical in the current period of apparently widespread reconfigurations of power across the continent and other regions, it actually predates it. In a 1981 paper, Donald Horowitz identified nineteen potentially separatist groups worldwide, based on differentials of economic advancements between groups and their regions. Of these groups, the only six that turned out not to be separatist were all African.17

Africa’s lack of separatism could be understandable if there were evidence of general satisfaction of Africans with their political conditions. Yet, this is not the case. Political violence is actually widespread across the region. At least thirty-five of Africa’s ninety-seven minorities at risk have engaged in nonseparatist political violence since 1990. And, as mentioned earlier, thirty-two of its forty-eight countries have suffered at least one minor nonseparatist civil conflict since 1960. In fact, most of Africa’s major conflicts have been for the overthrow of governments and control of the state rather than separation from it.

The paradoxical nature of African political violence—its tendency not to challenge the integrity of the weak state but to contribute to its reproduction—might be fruitfully illustrated by looking in more detail at the case of Chad, a particularly arbitrary and dysfunctional African postcolonial state with a long history of civil conflict. Like most other contemporary African states, Chad is a colonial invention, a space of conquests amalgamated in 1900 by the French, who used it mostly as a reservoir of labor for their other colonies and for the development of cotton plantations in the south. In the north, which is mostly desertic, there was only a token French presence. The French did little toward the effective integration of the territory and, at independence in 1960, Chad became the fragile container of a mosaic of different and occasionally polarized communities. Although there are many ethnic groups, the country’s main political divisor is the north-south axis. In precolonial times, southern communities had frequently been enslaved by kingdoms from farther north. But the French developed the south as “useful Chad,” and the country’s first president, François Tombalbaye, was from the south.

The immediate postcolonial hegemony of the south was soon challenged by northern elites. In 1966, the northern-based National Front for the Liberation of Chad (FROLINAT) launched an armed insurgency against the government. In 1975, Tombalbaye was overthrown and killed, and replaced in 1979 by a FROLINAT government under Goukouni Oueddei. After continued fighting, Oueddei was chased from power in 1982 by his former ally Hissène Habré, another northerner. Habré ruled until 1990, provoking the death of an estimated 40,000 Chadians, many of whom were southerners. He was eventually overthrown by one of his former lieutenants, Idriss Déby, a Zaghawa from the east. Déby has himself since been the target of multiple insurgencies, the most recent of which in April 2006 and January 2008 were only repelled thanks to French assistance.

The history of Chad is thus characterized by continuous warfare among armed groups from poorly integrated communities. When southern elites were in power, until 1975, northerners refused to accept their dominance and strove to take over. Thereafter, southerners became increasingly marginalized politically and turned into more passive spectators (and victims) of factional conflicts among northern and associated groups. Although Chad has endured through all these conflicts, it is dubious that it has existed as more than a political reference and the prize of insurgencies. It has been described as “aberrant, marginal, a fictive state.” Samuel Nolutshungu has noted that “both colonial rule and the postcolonial state have offered very little of tangible value to motivate a stronger attachment to a unifying state, which many populations encounter only intermittently and mostly as a restrictive and oppressive force.” If not absent or oppressive, the Chadian state has been unstable, incompetent, and unable even to pay its own employees outside of N’Djamena.

And yet, against these overwhelming odds, Chad has endured. To some extent, it owes its survival to repeated French interventions on its behalf. But these interventions have usually taken place against foreign threats, or in defense of existing governments against rebels. They have never occurred in defense of the state of Chad against separatists, for there have been none. Of the several dozen rebel organizations Chad has known since the mid-1960s, not a single one has had a secessionist agenda. When it began its insurgency against the southerners in the 1960s, FROLINAT made it clear that it did not seek secession. One of its tracts in 1971 read: “There will be no Katanga, no Biafra, in Chad. We will mercilessly eliminate any tendencies toward secessionism.” Similarly, after years of northern domination, southerners did not voice any separatist desire during Chad’s national conference in 1993. Robert Buitenhuis notes that, although southerners called for federalism and decentralization, they explicitly ruled out secessions. North-south rivalries are overwhelming, he notes, yet they “do not challenge the Chadian state per se . . . which they neither deny nor reject.” As Nolutshungu writes, state formation in Chad may be a failure but it has resulted in “the entrenchment of the idea of common belonging among Chadians and a real sense of nationhood.” And he adds: Chadians concur “that the state should exist. . . . It is as if no argument of experience, of failure and bloody disintegration, could challenge the presumption that the state that has once been decreed to exist, ought to continue to exist.” Such paradoxical resilience begs for an explanation.

Chad is not unique. After seizing control of half the national territory in 2003, Côte d’Ivoire’s Forces Nouvelles rebels insisted that their actions “should not be seen as reflecting a will or decision to secede.” A couple of years later, despite virulent opposition between the rebels and the government, their spokesman Sidiki Konate reaffirmed that “although the north has cotton,
diamonds and peanuts we don’t want to secede, we don’t want partition ... we don’t want a split.” Throughout Africa, Richard Joseph notes, “the more dis-abled the African state, the more tenacious the commitment to restore it.” And yet, the preservation of the state is not prima facie a maximizing strategy for the increasing number of peripheral communities at the margins of the hegemonic bloc that underwrites the continent’s postcolonial power configurations. More often than not, these groups have not reaped significant benefits from their integration into the state, and they have sometimes been persecuted at its hands. Often, too, they lie at the territorial edges of weak states and could conceivably make claims for autonomy that central governments would be hard put to challenge. One would expect the wide dispersion of natural resources in Africa to frequently support such exit strategies. Yet, despite some vocal opponents here and there who generally fail to translate their discourses into meaningful political mobilization, very few African marginalized peripheral groups actually promote separatist paths of development.

Why Do People Secede?

It is possible that Africa’s relative lack of separatism can be explained within our existing understanding of the determinants of secession. There may be variables that inhibit secessions around the world that could also account for Africa’s apparent deficit. I review most theories of separatism here. While a few shed some light on Africa’s situation, most reinforce the expectation that African states should see greater levels of separatism.

Economic arguments typically fall in this latter category. For example, several scholars suggest that regional inequalities within a country promote the rise of secessionist sentiments, whether in richer regions that resent subsidizing the rest of the country, or poorer ones that may blame the state for their failure to develop. In either version, this argument leads us to expect more rather than fewer secessions in Africa, where regional inequalities are substantial. Similarly, the availability of natural resources in specific regions is often linked to separatist conflicts. If a region is dependent on the center for its revenues, it has less bargaining power to demand autonomy. If it has its own resources, however, it is more likely to be aggressive about autonomy. Here again, the reliance of many African economies on primary commodities, and the latter’s tendency for regional concentration, lead us to expect greater separatism. Another argument, according to which lesser educated citizens are more likely to embrace manufactured (sub)nationalist sentiments, and lesser educated young males more likely to be recruited into secessionist movements for lack of better lifestyle alternatives, also suggests a greater prevalence of separatist conflicts in Africa where secondary school enrollments are low. Finally, some authors argue that poverty and slow growth rates are major secessionist risk factors, for they exacerbate the grievances of various groups and reduce the opportunity costs of warfare. Here again, we would expect Africa’s low-income countries to be relatively more prone to separatism than their better-off counterparts elsewhere around the world. In general, thus, economic theories would promote expectations of greater secessionism in Africa. If the continent’s separatist deficit is to be explained, we must therefore look at noneconomic arguments.

Cultural theories are only somewhat more enlightening. Quite a few of them also set up expectations of greater African separatism. One argument, for example, holds that the more culturally heterogeneous a country’s populations, the more likely they may be to wish for separate paths of self-determination. Africa’s broad ethnic diversity should then be associated with separatism. A variation of this argument suggests that territorial concentration affects ethnic groups’ desire for a separate destiny. Black minorities dispersed across nations, for example, provide a weak foundation for separatist activism. Kurds concentrated in the northern region of Iraq, on the other hand, have a more intuitive and practical claim to territorial sovereignty. In Africa, although people of different ethnic backgrounds can be dispersed throughout countries, each ethnic group also tends to have its home region.

On the other hand, other cultural theories might better account for Africa’s lack of separatism. Some authors suggest that, rather than mere heterogeneity, it is the presence of a dominant cultural group that encourages others to exit. Most African countries, however, count a large number of different ethnic communities and there is not usually one dominant group from whose control others might wish to escape. As such, there may be fewer incentives to secede, and less organizational capacity for doing it. It is also possible that specific groups will only seek separatism when they face eradication or fear cultural annihilation. In general, the weakness of African states may militate against secession in this case, as they may be incapable of fully meting out to their populations the required dose of “unbearable tyranny” or “savage repression.”

Finally, it is sometimes argued that ethnic diasporas contribute to secessionist sentiment as they tend to keep grievances alive, offer irredentist support, magnify beliefs in ethnic purity, and provide funding to local organizations. If there is a diaspora element to secessionism, then it might also militate against secessions in Africa. Although many Africans live abroad, not many of them are so economically well off as to financially support political movements in their region. In addition, apart from Eritreans and Somalis, it is unclear whether African diasporas are more likely to represent specific communities or to be broad cross-sections of their country’s populaces, which would negate their potential effects as minority representatives.

As with cultural explanations, political arguments can enlighten or muddle our understanding of Africa’s lack of separatism. Here too, some theories lead to expectations of greater separatism. The continent’s weak democratic
performance, for example, tends to deprive minorities from voice and protection, and might make it more likely that they would seek an exit option. Ironically, however, democratic transitions can exacerbate existing ethnic tensions and favor state disintegration, as happened in the Soviet Union or Czechoslovakia. Thus, the extent and intensity of political change may matter a great deal. Since many African countries have been engaged in almost continuous political transitions since the early 1990s, we should expect Africa to be among the most separatist of regions. Taking transition to one of its extremes, state collapse should also be associated with secessions. When the central state is so weakened as to be unable to exercise its authority across the territory, its ability to resist and prevent a separatist drive is greatly reduced. The collapse of the central state, as happened in different forms in the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia, or Somalia, also makes it more likely for peripheral or constituent regions to seek their own path. From this perspective, Africa’s secessionist deficit is particularly glaring. Apart from the separation of Somaliland from Somalia, no other region of the continent has seized upon state failure to disengage and build its own state. On a related note, the extent to which a system is prone to political violence in general may also herald a greater separatist propensity. Nonsecessionist conflicts can have secessionist effects, or both types of conflict may result from similar factors. But once again, the secession of Somaliland amid continued clan-based fighting in the rest of Somalia provides the only African example of the parallel dynamics of factional and separatist politics in Africa. Elsewhere on the continent, the general propensity to engage in political violence does not correlate with separatist activism.

Some political theories, however, make greater sense of Africa’s secessionist deficit. First, to some extent, the transition argument does explain something in Africa. It is hard to refute that the post-1990 period has been characterized by an increase in separatist activity on the continent. In fact, most of the instances of secessionist conflict in Table 2.1 took place after 1990. The inertia of African authoritarianism in the pre-1990 period may thus have accounted for the scarcity of separatism. The rigidities of the Cold War also probably froze more than one separatist ambition, while the end of the Soviet Union signaled new possibilities for subnationalist movements, at least in Eastern Europe, Central Asia, and the Balkans. Leading events in specific countries and demonstration effects illustrate normative shifts or perceptions of such shifts in the international community. When the principle of self-determination gains popularity over the norm of territorial integrity, the costs of secession may appear reduced to would-be separatists as the likelihood of recognition—the ultimate proof of existence—rises. This may have affected the decision of several African groups to engage, resume, or intensify separatist conflicts in the early 1990s. The support of a neighboring state might also be a crucial factor in determining the odds and success of a secession. The separation of Bangladesh from Pakistan in 1971 provides the textbook case on the effects of a supportive neighbor—India in this case—on the secession of groups or regions. As I will discuss later in this chapter, the fact that the rules of the African Union (AU) prohibit interference in the politics of another African state and violation of colonial boundaries may have reduced opportunities for neighborly support in Africa and, with it, the likelihood of separatism. A final useful political argument relates to the previous existence of a region as a state or distinct administrative unit. Having once been an independent state may facilitate contemporary mobilization toward separatist agendas. Subnational mobilization may also be easier in regions that already have their own administrative existence and apparatus, and where collective action is facilitated by established leadership and a preview of what independence could be. Regional administrative existence may promote the density of social ties through shared regional ethnic institutions, such as schools, newspapers, museums, and so on. This argument might be very relevant to Africa. From the perspective of the modern world system and of international law, precolonial African political systems did not exist, apart from Ethiopia, which was recognized by European powers. Thus, although some regions of Africa experienced statehood in the past, they have no experience of recognized statehood, which reduces their odds of recognition and may hamper their attempts at presenting their followers with a credible vision of their future as states. In addition, the strong historical centralization of the African state limits the extent to which subnational administrative units can become plausible frameworks of subnational mobilization. This variable may thus prove useful in explaining Africa’s separatist deficit.

There are finally a few arguments about the extent to which certain underlying structural circumstances may facilitate or impede separatist insurgencies. On the side of facilitation, the age of a country may matter. Intuitively, the younger a country, the less likely it is to have already passed through the growing pains of nation-building and national integration and the more vulnerable it may be to dismemberment. Clearly, African states are very young by world historical standards. This variable should thus make their territorial resilience more paradoxical. A couple of other arguments are more favorable to Africa’s lack of separatism. For one, having noncontiguous land masses may put states at greater risk of secessions. Countries whose territories are separated by other countries or by water (e.g., Angola, Comoros, or Pakistan before the secession of Bangladesh) may see their distant component(s) turn more vulnerable to centrifugal forces. There are a few discontinuous states in Africa, but they are the exception. The land mass contiguity of most African states may thus play in their favor. Second, the larger a country and its population, the greater the potential for breakup. Most African states have relatively small populations, which should reduce the odds of secessionism. There are, however, a few very large states on the continent, most of which have been affected by separatism: the DRC, Ethiopia, Nigeria, and Sudan come to mind.
Altogether, theories of separatism offer a mixed bag with respect to Africa’s secessionist deficit. Some might partly account for Africa’s lesser propensity for secessions. Most, however, only deepen the mystery. Either way, they call for empirical verification.

**Estimating Africa’s Secessionist Deficit**

One way to reliably assess the explanatory power of these theories is to combine them in a general model and observe their effects simultaneously. Multivariate regression analysis is a statistical technique that does just that. It can tell which variables are robustly associated with separatism, positively or negatively. Africa itself can be thought of as one such variable. Every country can be coded as African or not and the effects of that variable on separatism can be estimated. If all the other variables capture what inhibits separatism in Africa, the effects of the Africa variable will not be statistically significant. Whatever distinguishes the continent will have already been captured. If, on the other hand, the Africa variable has its own negative effect on separatism, there still is some unexplained continent-specific condition that is imirical to separatism.45

Because some theories deal with features of countries as a whole (e.g., level of development, size), while others relate to regions within countries (e.g., regional income inequalities), I proceeded along two different tracks. First, I created a data set by countries. This approach takes as the unit of analysis the structure against which separatist movements are created. For example, characteristics of Russia would be analyzed, while the dependent variable— the presence of a secessionist conflict—would be triggered by the activities of Chechen rebels. This approach makes it easier to collect data and is well suited to test theories that relate to countries, but it is weaker for testing region-specific theories. Because data by country is available over relatively long periods of time, it is also possible to enter several observations for each country at different time periods. Doing so allows us to control for variables that change over time. The country data set covers all available countries of the world over the period 1960–1999 in five-year intervals (1960–1964, 1965–1969, etc.).

I derived another data set from the Minorities at Risk project at the Center for International Development and Conflict Management at the University of Maryland.47 This project identifies 338 “politically-active communal groups in all countries with a current population of at least 500,000.” For each of these groups, it codes numerous cultural, political, economic, demographic, and other characteristics. In this second data set, I used each one of these 338 groups as an observation. Although these are identity groups and not regions, they are proxies for subnational regions, controlling for the extent of their geographical concentration. Using the PRIO data set again, each group was coded as to whether and how intensely it engaged in a separatist conflict over the period 1990–2003 (for which most data was available). Forty-eight groups qualify as separatist with at least minor violence since 1990.48 In addition, the MAR data set offers a variable measuring the intensity of separatist sentiments for each group. Using both the PRIO-derived variable and the MAR index, I tested the relationship between separatism and group characteristics. I also created a version of the MAR separatism index for the country data set by adding up the separatist scores of all minorities for each country. Some hypotheses were tested in both the country and the group settings, which gave a better assessment of their robustness; others depend on variables only available for one of the data sets. At any rate, I used both conflict and sentiment as dependent variables in each data set.

Tables 2.3 and 2.4 present the findings by countries and minorities, respectively. For each table, I first did a set of regressions by category of explanatory variables. In other words, I first tested the economic theories, then the cultural theories, and so on. Variables that were statistically associated with separatism in each of these specific models were included in the general models shown in the tables. If a variable was not significant in the first sets of regressions, it did not make the cut for the final model. The fact that a variable had a significant impact on separatism in the first sets did not guarantee, however, that it would still do so once all other relevant variables were brought in. Thus, some of the variables in the tables are not statistically significant.

**Results of Analysis**

Before commenting on the effects of the Africa variable, it is worth briefly discussing the overall results and the general predictive quality of the models. Overall, political theories seem to have greater predictive powers than either the economic or cultural ones. Several theories that are almost considered common wisdom in the literature, such as the linkage between natural resources and separatism, do not appear very robust. In fact, none of the economic variables had any significant impact in any of the regressions. Thus, poverty, lack of education, the presence of natural resources, and economic differentials between a region and the rest of the country do not appear to be reliable triggers of separatist conflict or sentiment.

Among cultural variables, the linguistic diversity of a country is a very significant predictor of separatism. The more heterogeneous a country, the more likely it is to encounter separatist activity. This relationship is not as
Table 2.3  The Causes of Separatism at the Country Level

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Model (1) Conflict</th>
<th>Model (2) Sentiment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Africa</td>
<td>-0.49***</td>
<td>-0.9***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(6.4)</td>
<td>(3.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latin America</td>
<td>-0.44***</td>
<td>-0.2***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(8.3)</td>
<td>(4.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GDP (S000)</td>
<td>-0.004</td>
<td>0.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.45)</td>
<td>(0.1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linguistic diversity</td>
<td>0.41***</td>
<td>3.6**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(4.3)</td>
<td>(2.1)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Size of largest group</td>
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<td>-0.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State failure</td>
<td>0.2***</td>
<td>1.9***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(4.1)</td>
<td>(2.8)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nonseparatist political violence</td>
<td>0.07***</td>
<td>(3.3)</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regime transition</td>
<td>-0.05***</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(2.8)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-Cold War</td>
<td>0.12**</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(2.5)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Repression</td>
<td>0.38***</td>
<td>2.4</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(3.3)</td>
<td>(1.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population (millions)</td>
<td>0.54**</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(2.1)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Country size (million sq. miles)</td>
<td></td>
<td>3.1***</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R²</td>
<td>0.18</td>
<td>0.45</td>
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<td></td>
<td>(2.8)</td>
<td>(2.6)</td>
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<tr>
<td>No. of countries</td>
<td>153</td>
<td>143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of observations</td>
<td>973</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Note: Model (1) is estimated with a Pruis-Winsen regression, with heteroskedastic panels corrected standard errors, 1st-order autocorrelation. It covers the period 1960–1999, in five-year separattist conflict, on a 0–3 scale. Numbers in parentheses are Z values. Model (2) is estimated with an ordinary least squares regression, with heteroskedasticity-robust standard errors. It covers the period 1990–1995. The dependent variable (territ) is the country sum of each of its minorities' score on the MAR separattist index. Unlike in Model (1) Post-Cold War is not measured in model (2) because this data set has no time dimension. Numbers in parentheses are t values. Constants omitted for both models. Variables omitted because of insignificance in all partial models: male secondary education, oil, democracy, country age, and territorial discontinuity. Significance (two tails): * for 10%; ** for 5%; *** for 1%.

clear-cut when looking at the level of minorities, however. None of the indicators of cultural heterogeneity or distance between groups, their regional concentration, their share of the population and the presence of a diaspora seemed to matter in terms of promoting the willingness of a group to engage in separatist conflict. Yet, having a regional base (as opposed to being a dispersed minority) did favor the rise of separatist sentiment. That is the only statistically reliable cultural effect on groups, however, and it would be expected to favor African separatism, since African minorities typically have a region of origin.

Table 2.4  The Causes of Separatism at the Subnational Level

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Model (1) Conflict</th>
<th>Model (2) Sentiment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Africa</td>
<td>-0.39**</td>
<td>-0.7***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(2.5)</td>
<td>(3.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latin America</td>
<td>-0.41***</td>
<td>-1.1***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(3.8)</td>
<td>(5.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GDP in 1990</td>
<td>-3.5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.6)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male secondary education, 1990</td>
<td>-0.001</td>
<td>(0.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.2)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oil and coal</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>0.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.7)</td>
<td>(0.4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic differentials</td>
<td></td>
<td>-0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regional base</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.6***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(3.4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group concentration</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.2)</td>
<td>(0.9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belief specificity</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.2)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural heterogeneity</td>
<td>0.27</td>
<td>0.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.4)</td>
<td>(0.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diaspora</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discrimination, 1990</td>
<td>0.1***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(2.9)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State failure, 1990</td>
<td>0.12***</td>
<td>0.1**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(2.9)</td>
<td>(2.4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lost autonomy</td>
<td>0.14***</td>
<td>0.4***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(2.9)</td>
<td>(6.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autonomous region</td>
<td>0.34**</td>
<td>0.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(2.5)</td>
<td>(1.1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friendly neighbor</td>
<td></td>
<td>-0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group size</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Country size</td>
<td>-0.03*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.7)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R²</td>
<td>0.25</td>
<td>0.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of groups</td>
<td>310</td>
<td>288</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Ordinary least square regressions, with heteroskedasticity-robust standard errors. In model (1), the dependent variable (territ) is a measure of the occurrence and intensity of separatist conflict, on a scale from 0 to 3, measured for the period 1990–2003. In model (2), the dependent variable (separationism) is a measure of the strength of separatist sentiment among subnational groups, on a scale from 0 to 3, for the 1990s. Numbers in parentheses are t values. Constants omitted. Variables omitted because of insignificance in all partial models: racial, linguistic and customs specificity, population share, dispersion, democracy, and territorial discontinuity. Significance (two tails): * for 10%; ** for 5%; *** for 1%.
The greater impact of the political variables suggests that the decision to secede, around the world, is first and foremost a decision that derives from a country’s political system and from a group’s particular political situation. Possibly one of the most powerful findings of Table 2.3 is the systematic and large effect of state failure on both separatist conflict and desire. The more failed the state, the more likely subnational components will want out (and the better they might think their odds are). In addition, the prevalence of nonseparatist political violence usually relates to the likelihood of separatist conflict. Both of these variables, of course, would lead us to expect more separatism in Africa. Regime transitions, however, surprisingly appear to reduce the likelihood of secessions. Finally, the end of the Cold War did indeed encourage separatist insurgencies, as does the level of repression of minorities by a regime.

Turning to specific minorities in Table 2.4, politics continues to be the driving force. Both being discriminated against and living in a failed state are strong predictors of the willingness of a group to engage in secessionist conflict, and the latter also of separatist sentiment in general. And, as predicted, having once had autonomy strongly militates in favor of being separatist, as does the current autonomous status of a minority. Given the lack of historical or contemporary autonomy of many of Africa’s regions and minorities, this variable is likely to contribute to Africa’s separatist deficit.

**Africa and Latin America**

Even when accounting for the different theories of separatism, there are fewer secessionist conflicts in Africa than one would expect, as indicated by the significantly negative coefficients of the Africa variables in Tables 2.3 and 2.4. All models systematically overpredict the likelihood of separatism in Africa, even though this region is very well represented in all samples, with more than forty countries and some ninety minorities. Table 2.5 shows the results of an experiment. Running the regressions of Tables 2.3 and 2.4 in all non-African countries, I obtained coefficients of the effects of each specific variable on separatism. I then plugged in these coefficients to generate predicted values of separatism for African and non-African countries, and compared those with the actual values in both parts of the world. While the models were generally a good fit for the rest of the world, Table 2.5 shows that they were way off the mark for Africa, where they predicted levels of separatist sentiment and separatist conflict respectively as much as 4.8 and 2.6 times larger than actual. In other words, there are as yet untheorized reasons for why African countries experience relatively little separatism. Our current understanding of the dynamics of secessions does not allow us to account for Africa’s separatist deficit.

Nor does it, however, make sense of Latin America’s. In fact, Latin America has not experienced a single separatist conflict since the separation of Panama from Colombia in 1903. This unusual trend begs the same question as

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Actual (%)</th>
<th>Predicted (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Proportion of country-years with separatist conflict</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Africa</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rest of the world</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proportion of groups with separatist conflict</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Africa</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rest of the world</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proportion of countries with separatist sentiment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Africa</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rest of the world</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proportion of groups with separatist sentiment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Africa</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rest of the world</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: Predicted values are calculated based on logit versions of the models from Tables 2.3 and 2.4, with the dependent variables converted to dummies. The models are first run for all non-African countries. Using the coefficients they generate, predicted values are established for the entire world. Reported here are the predicted and actual values for African countries and non-African countries.*

Africa’s: Can it be explained through the lens of prevailing theories? The answer, by and large, seems to be that Latin American groups and minorities are not constructed in ways that either promote separatism or make it a thinkable part of the registry of political action. Latin American countries do not typically have regionally based subnational groups that could engage in territorial collective action. Until recently, their political divisions were more based on class than ethnicity. Their indigenous minorities also tend to be heterogeneous communities. In addition, the negative Latin American effect in the group data sets might partly be an artifact of the type of data that MAR reports and the type of groups it identifies. Of the thirty-three Latin American groups in the data set (here are ninety African ones), ten are categorized as “ethnocracies,” that is, “ethnically or culturally distinct peoples, usually descended from slaves or immigrants, most of whom occupy a distinct social and economic stratum or niche.” The categorization of these groups as classes suggests that the mode of their relationship with the state and with other groups in society is not regional, even if they may occasionally inhabit a particular region. Apart from the “Chinese” of Panama, nine of these ten groups are black minorities (or variations thereof, such as “Black Karibs” in Honduras, “Antillean Blacks” in Costa Rica, or “Afro-Brazilians” in Brazil). The twenty other observations are all “Indigenous Peoples,” that is, “conquered descendants of earlier inhabitants of a region who live mainly in conformity with traditional social, economic, and cultural customs that are sharply distinct from those of dominant groups.” These indigenous groups will on occasion be regionally concentrated, yet their existence as a group is more often a function of external categorization than internal aggregate
identity. For indeed, these “indigenous peoples” often include groups of different regions and/or languages and consequently make poor candidates for collective action. Eleven of them are actually categorized in the plural, as “indigenous peoples,” but aggregated as one group each. For Bolivia, Ecuador, and Peru, the data set differentiates between “lowland” and “highland indigenous peoples” but also treats each as a single, supposedly homogeneous group. For all of Latin America, the only indigenous groups that are named are the Amazonian Indians of Brazil, and the Mayans and Zapotecs of Mexico, the latter ones of which actually score some positive value on the MAR separatism index. In conclusion, the preponderance of ethnoclasses and indigenous peoples among Latin America’s minorities is partly a substantive reason for why this region has developed less separatism (as most theories of separatism assume that a regionally grounded and distinct community is available to develop separatist sentiments) and partly a methodological problem of mixing Latin American apples with oranges from other parts of the world.

The question of the negative effect on separatism of being an African country or minority is more puzzling. Many of the variables associated with separatism in the statistical models—ethnic heterogeneity, state failure, nonseparatist political violence, and repression of minorities—are prevalent in Africa. What prevents these factors from triggering secessions on the continent? Are there some conditions specific to Africa that act as inhibitors of separatism?

**Why Do African States Not Disintegrate?**

The most commonly heard argument for the stability of Africa’s political geography suggests that the rules of the Organization of African Unity (OAU), which commit member states to respect the territorial integrity of other member states, inhibit territorial change by outlawing it. The principles of noninterference, territorial integrity, and respect of colonial borders were reiterated in the Constitutive Act of the AU in 2000. While these rules do not apply to rebel groups, the argument goes that they make it harder for the latter to obtain support from another state in their separatist struggles, reducing the friendly neighbor effect. For example, they make a case like India’s military intervention on behalf of Bangladesh in its struggle against Pakistan legally all but impossible. Some believe that these rules might also lower the probability that a separatist movement would be recognized, without which little can be diplomatically achieved. According to this argument, then, the OAU has set norms that have been more inimical to self-determination than elsewhere.

To some extent, this argument rings true. Yet, it has some serious flaws. First is the question of whether the principle of territorial integrity truly is more salient in Africa than elsewhere. International relations and international law specialists are rather unanimous in asserting the near absolute nature of the principle, while the norm of self-determination is deemed to be everywhere much weaker. It is in fact a rather solid doctrinal and jurisprudential position in international law that the right of self-determination is restricted by the principle of territorial integrity. The 1945 UN Charter makes clear that the right of self-government cannot be equated with a right to secession. Resolution 151 (1960) of the UN General Assembly makes disruption of territorial integrity incompatible with the UN Charter, a principle restated in the final act of the 197 Helsinki Conference. Most recently, the European Union (EU) reassessed the doctrine of territorial integrity in the 1990s in response to the Yugoslav crisis acknowledging the right, under certain normative conditions, of independent states to the constitutive republics of the federation—Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Macedonia, Montenegro, Slovenia, and Serbia—while denying it to its constituent nations (or ethnic groups). The basic underlying principle was that “the right of self-determination must not involve changes to existing frontiers.” One can therefore be more confident that sanctity of boundaries “in no significant way distinguishes the African position from that universally adopted by states.”

Yet, one could argue that, although universal, the principle is strong even for Africa because of the OAU. Its resolutions have no teeth, however, and make little difference in practice. Many African states make a habit of violating OAU resolutions. OAU norms did not prevent Côte d’Ivoire, Gabo, Tanzania, and Zambia from recognizing Biafra in the late 1960s. In addition to the 1970s, Libya supported separatist movements in northern Chad; Chadian government supported separatists in Southern Sudan; the Sudanese government supported separatists in Ethiopia; and Ethiopia and Uganda were helping the Southern Sudanese. Note also that, from the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia, the only state in the world that has in fact constitutionally recognized the legality of secession (although largely reining from applying its own law) is Ethiopia, the seat of the AU. As a result, talking of an effective norm of self-restraint in Africa is somewhat exaggerated. Furthermore, if such a norm exists, what power do African states have to enforce it? Certain OAU norms of territorial integrity do not seem to apply to Casamance, whereas received assistance from Guinea-Bissau and Gambia, or South Sudan, as indicated above. Moreover, Africans have tinkered with their borders over time, especially right after independences, showing that the principle of postcolonial integrity is no stronger than elsewhere. Rather than the norm of integrity being stronger in Africa, it might only be more salient because African states are empirically weaker than states elsewhere. Thus the greater contrast between their weakness is the rigidity of their territorial claims. This makes the rules appear particularly stringent, but they are more so than elsewhere. Across the world, at any given time, sovereignty c
be thought of as in fixed supply. When they decide to engage in separatist rebellion, in Africa as elsewhere, rebels are choosing, for their foreseeable future, a nonsovereign solution to their problems.

The empirical findings about separatist “sentiment” described in the previous section also undermine the argument that Africans are not separatist because their actions would be somehow thwarted by lack of recognition or lack of foreign help. If this were the case, we would expect a lack of separatist insurgencies in the region but not of separatist aspirations. Yet, instead, the data show that Africans are on average less likely than people of other regions even to voice separatist preferences, much less to act upon them. We must therefore find an explanation for both of these dimensions, which a focus on OAU rules of recognition does not provide. At any rate, there is no particular evidence that recognition is less forthcoming in Africa than elsewhere. Lee Seymour has shown that although there have been eighty-four different separatist conflicts around the world since 1975, only five internationally recognized states have been created through violent secession since 1945, one of which—Eritrea— was in Africa. Thus, while the propensity for separatism is lesser in Africa than elsewhere, the odds of recognition are not worse in Africa. In fact, Seymour’s data suggest that the broad gains from separatist conflict are greater in Africa than elsewhere.

Another commonly heard argument is that African states have endured because there is no obviously superior arrangement available. For example, it is often argued a contrario that there are no clear foundations for separatism in Africa because no region is sufficiently homogeneous to warrant secessionism, thereby justifying the existence of, and attachment to, the postcolonial state as rational by default. Certainly, there are no clear cultural lines of demarcation along which many countries could ever be partitioned. While this is true, there are also usually no clear cultural lines of demarcation between African countries, making this argument a mere matter of inertia. More important, the dearth of homogeneous potential successor states cannot explain the continent’s lack of separatism, as secessions are only rarely a matter of cultural unity. Neither Eritrea nor Somaliland—Africa’s two somewhat successful secessions—are ethnically or culturally more uniform than Ethiopia or the rest of Somalia. Nor are any of the former Soviet republics that proclaimed their independence in the 1990s ethnically homogeneous. While my findings suggest that the regional concentration of a group does promote separatism, they do not imply any territorial monopoly of this group over its region. There is no reason therefore to expect regions of African countries to be less separatist because of their ethnic heterogeneity. The province of Katanga, in the DRC, is a case in point. Katanga’s Lunda were a minority whose party, the Confédération des Associations Tribales du Katanga (Confederation of Tribal Associations of Katanga, CONAKAT), only polled 11 percent of provincial votes in the December 1959 communal elections, but who nevertheless embarked on a secession drive from 1960 to 1963 that, although never recognized, developed a substantial degree of functional effectiveness.

One also occasionally hears the argument that secession-prone regions of Africa no longer display any separatism because they are already de facto run autonomously. National governments have been so weak that there is no need to challenge them and make the split more formal. Local leaders can exert autonomy without rocking the boat of national unity. According to Ian Gorus, discussing the case of Katanga in 2002, “the actors are much more autonomous now. They have been since the weakening of Mobutu. As a result, they do not feel the need to challenge Kinshasa.” With this argument, then, weak states should be more likely to see national compliance, and strong ones to face separatist conflicts. Yet, the evidence is rather unequivocal against this proposition. One of the most statistically robust determinants of separatist conflict and sentiment around the world, as shown in Tables 2.3 and 2.4, is state failure. That it is not more so in Africa is paradoxical. In addition, the claims of autonomy of local African elites might be exaggerated. In Katanga, for example, Kinshasa continued to appoint governors throughout the war, and progovernment Zimbabwean forces were deployed in the region from 1998 to 2003. Numerous African regional elites may engage in parallel informal activities for their benefit, but they do not as such acquire autonomy from the center. In fact, they often rely on their official role as state agents to carry out these activities, and one tends to find a surprising local resilience of the weak state in these regions, as illustrated in Chapter 3. In addition, while making a plausible claim with respect to the lack of separatist activism by local elites, this type of argument does not explain the lack of separatist sentiments among regional populations at large.

Another variation of this argument stresses that people escape the state individually. They go into exile, for example. They become refugees. Or they withdraw into subsistence agriculture. This type of individual exit has been shown, since the work of Victor Azarya and Naomi Chazan, to deflate capacity for collective exit or the use of collective voice. Yet again, while certainly contributing to an explanation of the lack of collective separatist action, this hypothesis does not properly make sense of the lack of separatist preferences among people. Moreover, the suboptimal nature of individual escapes, and the material miseries they imply, might logically be expected to eventually trigger the desire for a more collective response, or at least reduce the opportunity costs of such action.

Faced with all these paradoxes, some have then argued that the lack of African separatism might simply be due to successful national integration, shaped by colonial and postcolonial shared experiences. For Neuberger, the “emotional ethnic ties” of partitioned African groups have weakened in the process of national integration, reducing thereby the demand for irredentism.
Crawford Young, for his part, highlights the depth and territorial specificity of nationalist feelings generated in Africa over the past forty years and through the colonial episode. For him, African nationalism originates in the shared experience of “common colonial subjugation.” For this reason, he contends, there has been no real confrontation between territorial nationalism and political ethnicity. Furthermore, the affective ties of territorial nationalism appear impervious to negative popular perceptions of the state and its behavior and have so far shielded states torn by civil strife or prolonged economic crises from disintegrating completely.72

If territorial nationalism is the cause of territorial resilience in Africa, however, its own origins in turn remain unclear. Thinking of nationalism as an exogenous variable is not particularly helpful in this case. To say that Africans do not challenge their states because they are nationalist tends to merely rephrase the puzzle of territorial resilience. Moreover, if colonialism really shaped identity through shared misery, how is one to explain the partition of India and other nonterritorial separatisms in postcolonial environments? How does one also account for nationalism in Africa’s former French colonies, since the latter were ruled under two distinct administrative entities—Afrique Occidentale Française and Afrique Equatoriale Française—until the late 1950s? And what is one to make of the exclusive character of some of Africa’s nationalisms, such as Ivoirité, which purports to exclude large segments of Ivorians from the benefits of belonging to the state? This argument is also hard to reconcile with the salience of subnational conflicts in Africa, which tend to be simultaneous with professions of nationalism. In the DRC, for example, where nationalism is rampant, Katangans have fought Kasaians, Kundas have opposed Lubas, Hemas and Lendus have killed each other in the Ituri province, each region has “autochthonous” populations discriminating against newcomers, and the whole country seems unified in its hatred of its Rwandophone minorities. It remains to be explained why territorial nationalism coexists with political ethnicity in Africans’ quest for identity and trumps it when it comes to providing the foundations for statehood.

Finally, inferring from James Fearon and David Laitin, Africa’s lesser relative preponderance of separatist violence could be due to the fact that African countries tend to have a plurality of smaller ethnic groups rather than large hegemonic ones. These authors find that having one dominant ethnic group is associated with separatism, as minorities consider it less likely that they could obtain a share of the state, given the existing domination of the majority, and are more likely therefore to pursue a separate path.73 Since African states are so heterogeneous, their constituent groups may be more likely to fight for control of the state than for escape from it, as they each have a decent chance of grabbing some share of power. This echoing Benjamin Neuberger’s argument about the “plural softness” of the African state, a “state of minorities,” which does not have the will or capacity to fully enforce itself upon its constituent groups, finding instead ways to accommodate them and give them access to the state.74 Looking at the data, it is true indeed that the largest ethnic groups in African countries average 41 percent of the population, whereas elsewhere around the world they reach about 73 percent on average. Yet, there is no empirical backing for the claim that the lack of a dominant group reduces separatism. Table 2.4 suggests that there is no effect of group size on separatist conflict or sentiment. Yet, although the issue of group size alone is not relevant, the “plural softness” hypothesis has some merit. I will return to it later as a building block of my own argument.

In conclusion, another theory of the lack of territorial challenge to the postcolonial African state is needed if we are to make sense of Africa’s separatist deficit. It is the purpose of this book to offer a new answer. Before that, the next chapter turns to the institutional equivalent of the separatist deficit and describes the perplexing resilience of the authority of otherwise decrepit state institutions in Africa’s failed states.

Notes

1. Fearon and Laitin, “Weak States.”
4. Throughout this book, I use separatism and secessionism interchangeably to refer to the desire for one’s sovereign independent country.
5. See Chapter 6.
7. I discuss Latin America in somewhat more detail later in this chapter.
8. The count of forty-nine is a very conservative estimate, aggregating many related conflicts. Under this count, for example, Chad has had only one civil conflict since 1960.
10. Treisman, “Russia’s Ethnic Revival.”
12. Ibid., 149, emphasis mine.
14. Clapham, “Ethiopia,” 30. To be fair, this is probably also true of some groups in other regions.
15. Forrest, Subnationalism in Africa.
19. Ibid., 233.
22. Quoted by ibid., 61.
52. Ibid.
53. The three remaining Latin American minorities-at-risk groups are the “East Indians” and “Africans” of Guyana, and the “Jews” of Argentina.
56. Bartkus, The Dynamic of Secession, 68.
57. See Dugard, “A Legal Basis.”
59. For a good summary of the doctrine articulated by the Badiner Commission, see Rich, “Recognition of States.”
62. Seymour, “The Surprising Success.”
63. For example, Young, “Nation, Ethnicity, and Citizenship,” 245.
65. Forrest, Subnationalism in Africa.
67. Gérard-Libois, La sécession katangaise, 41.
68. Ian Gorus, interview, Lubumbashi, April 2002.
69. See also Rottman, Fiscal Disobedience.
70. Azarya and Chazan, “Disengagement from the State.”
72. Young, “Nationalism and Ethnicity.”
Beyond its paradoxical capacity to preserve its territorial integrity, the African state also displays institutional resilience. However, failed the state, its agencies and laws retain currency. They maintain their local authority, even when collapsed, the state does not dissipate or dissolve. Even when the government itself has become unable to project its power, the state apparatus remains ubiquitous across its territory. Even when citizens respond to state failure with opportunistic disengagement and substitution, they cannot fully free themselves from it.

This resilience of the weak state’s authority may come as a surprise given its very weakness and the multiplicity of adaptive institutional arrangements devised by Africans to deal with its shortcomings and avoid its exactions. Nonstate associative life is vibrant in Africa, and the state faces competing sources of public authority. Yet, by and large, societal responses to state failure have not prevented the reproduction of state institutions and of their authority. The African weak state is formidably resilient. Incapable, deserted, hollowed out, and substituted for, it nevertheless manages to retain a commanding presence in the lives of Africans. State personnel and agencies still find the power to impose themselves onto people. In addition, nonstate actors tend to acquiesce to the state’s continued existence and reproduce its authority in their interactions. Even in zones of open insurgency, rebels typically maintain and use the state institutions left behind. They become the state more than they challenge it. Altogether, the authority of the African state appears immune to its incapacity; it transcends its weakness and failure.

Staying Alive: Agencies of the Failed State

Robert Rotberg’s claim that state collapse is equivalent to a “vacuum of authority,” where the state is reduced to “a mere geographical expression, a black
hole into which a failed polity has fallen [and where] the forces of entropy have overwhelmed the radiance that hitherto provided some semblance of order and other vital political goods," does not find much support in Africa where state failure does not translate into an institutional vacuum. Michael Bratton’s assertion that the weak African state "remains the most prominent landmark on the African institutional landscape" is more accurate. The agencies of the failed state tend to go on and on, and continue to carry authority, however comatose they might be. They may no longer do much for citizens, but they are still there and they continue to make their presence felt. They retain a degree of legal authority, even when they are severed from the center. Thus, while a government might be hard put to project any power outside its capital city, it will not be uncommon for state agencies in remote provinces of the country to continue to exercise local authority. The laws, institutions, and agencies of the state endure; its authority continues to project across the territory, even when not enforced from the center.

Sam Noulutshungu captured this resilience in his study of Chad, an enduring but continuously failed state. Noting the state’s material disintegration, he remarked that "there is another sense in which it continued to exist. The state is also an ensemble of competences, legal and ideological... and of possibilities of authoritative action, uniquely recognized as such, both domestically and internationally." The puzzling continued "authoritative action" of the local personnel and agencies of the failed state in the DRC is one of the main reasons I initially embarked on this research project. I was surprised as I traveled to Katanga, North Kivu, and Orientale provinces in 2001 and 2002 with the visibly enduring presence of the state in these remote and largely disconnected regions. Unpaid for months if not years, many civil servants continued to report to work, even when their offices had been destroyed or pillaged as in Kisangani, which had suffered three rounds of devastating war. Without any budget to carry out their mission, they continued to go through the motions of their work. Multiple "authorities" persisted in checking one’s papers, demanding and issuing authorizations for seemingly anything, and enforcing apparently outdated, irrelevant, or otherwise burdensome regulations. In Katanga, civil society activists complained to me that, although they had taken over responsibility for many services from a triumphant government, they could not shake off the ability of state agents to impose themselves onto them. "We build private roads, but the state comes and sets up tolls," one of them told me.

Others have noticed the remarkable degree of local physical state presence and authority of the failed Congolese state. A 2006 report on mining in Katanga by Global Witness noted a "bewildering range of officials... at the entrance point to each mine, at the mineshafs... at the exit point from the mines, along the roads, at checkpoints and at border posts," including representatives of several departments from the Ministry of Mines, the Mining Police, the Ministry of External Trade, the Office des Douanes et Accises (Customs Office, OFIDA), the National Intelligence Agency (ANR), the Lubumbashi mayor’s office, local traditional chiefs (who are state agents in Congo), the state-sponsored Association of Artisan Miners of Katanga, and last but not least, the Office Congolais de Contrôle (Congolese Office of Control, OCC).

Similarly, a 2007 report by the Pole Institute, a North Kivu–based Congolese NGO, highlighted the multitude of state agencies and the continued legal formality of procedures involved in the official weighing of cassiterite exports by trading firms in Goma. These agencies included the official minerals certification body, the OCC, OFIDA, the nontax state revenue collection agency, the Provincial Mining Division, a representative of the governor, the ANR, the immigration control agency, the military intelligence agency, the Mining Police, the presidential guard, and the provincial military police. All these agencies were present at the weighing and many of them later required traders to come to their offices for the formal issuance of certificates. Yet, this was all taking place in a city and region where state agencies long ago stopped providing services such as security, public health, education, and infrastructure. The state was both no longer there and yet still overwhelmingly present.

Such resilience is not unique to Congo. In partitioned Côte d’Ivoire, then largely under the authority of a UN mission, President Laurent Gbagbo stressed in 2006 that "every institution functions," although he noted that "the decisions we take do not manage to reach the entire territory." On the one hand, Gbagbo was delusional, for the state had really collapsed around him. On the other hand, he was right, for its apparatus had endured despite his own personal lack of control over it. Even in zones of conflict in the west of the country, state cocoa marketing agencies continued to function, for example. In the north, rebels maintained and enforced international borders and levied customs duties and taxes. Schools followed the national curriculum and administered state-mandated school tests.

While stressing the “striking” absence of government in rural areas of the Central African Republic, Thomas Bierschenk and Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan also note the state’s continued local institutional presence and authority as embodied in village and district chiefs. Even when they no longer receive instructions or salaries from the center and must compete with other sources of local authority, these chiefs carry on as local state appendages and are the main perpetrators of the weak state. Most of them, they write, “see themselves first and foremost as representatives of the state in a quite literal interpretation of [the law].... They visually emphasize this by sporting an official medal which symbolically reinforces the official definition of their duty.” This is not only true of the Central African Republic. Across the continent, “encapsulated in state bureaucracy by legislation,” chiefs reproduce the local authority of the weak state.

Even when nonstate agents organize to substitute for failed state agencies, the latter tend to endure in parallel. In the DRC again, with the formal judiciary
ravaged by corrupt practices in the 1990s, many lawyers started resorting to out-of-court settlements, a practice that gave rise to a parallel negotiated legal system. Yet, the latter did not displace the formal judiciary and actually relied on its jurisprudence and other official sources of the law. Moreover, out-of-court settlements were brought to court clerks for authentication. The legal framework of the state also perpetuated itself through the work of the justice and peace commissions developed by the Catholic Church. Although they meant to “circumvent the state as a mediator of societal conflicts,” Denis Tall writes that these institutions were “informed by state-formulated facts of offenses as a ‘legal’ framework. . . . They thus [upheld], in effect, modern state laws and may ultimately [have bolstered] the persistence of statehood.”

Social Acquiescence and the Nonstate Reproduction of State Authority

The capacity of the state’s agencies and legal structure to endure in decentralized form in times of weakness might partly be a function of the significant degree of acquiescence to these agencies displayed by citizens at large, however cynical they might be about them. Take the example of the traders in the markets of Lubumbashi, Katanga, who are, as in many parts of Africa, overwhelmed with taxes and fees. They pay an initial tax to have access to market space, monthly and annual taxes for the right to maintain a market stall, a tax for water (which they do not get), and a tax for cleaning (which they have to do themselves). They also have to build their own stall and there are no functioning restrooms and virtually no other infrastructure. In other words, they receive nothing in exchange for the multiple extractions to which they are subjected. The revenues from the taxes, collected by the market managers who are appointed by the city, evaporate along the way. The market managers contend they pass on the funds to the commune, which, in turn, reports transferring them to the city, and so on. This is hardly unusual. What is surprising, however, is the apparent acceptance of this arbitrary taxation by the retailers themselves. In a poll of the opinions of traders about these extractions by public authority in several Lubumbashi markets, typical responses included “it is the commune’s money,” “we do not have a choice,” “what are we going to do? It is the state that requires it,” “it is not up to us to demand justification,” and finally, “ni bya l’Etat,” which means “it belongs to the state” or “these are the things of the state” in Swahili.15

There is more than fatalism in this acceptance of the arbitrariness of the public domain. The “ni bya l’Etat” expression is actually in part ironic and is often proffered at tax collectors by traders to signify their understanding that this money will actually line their pockets and not accrue to the state. In fact, it seems to be used anytime someone abuses a public good. If a civil servant is told to carefully manage public monies or to take care of the public assets under his control, he might answer “ni bya l’Etat,” which signifies that the money or asset in question is now removed from the realm of accountability by virtue of being in the domain of the state. It affirms both his public authority over these assets and his capacity to abuse them. The same expression, in the mouths of his victims, conveys their understanding and general acceptance, however grudgingly, of this state of affairs.

The anecdote from the Lubumbashi markets illustrates what might be a broader trend across the continent, characterized by a reluctance to challenge state institutions or state prerogatives while simultaneously knowing that people in position of state authority abuse it. Data on Nigeria from the Afrobarometer tell a similar story. When asked “how much do you trust the police?” 89 percent of Nigerians responded “not at all” or only “a little.” But when asked the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with the statement “the police always have the right to make people obey the law,” 78 percent agreed or strongly agreed.17 Regular police exactions (the official police slogan “Fire for Fire” has been popularly perverted into “Fire for Naira”) do not undermine the perceived legality of the police as an official institution.18 Yet, everybody knows that police are for sale, that they use their official functions for private profit. In Nigeria as in Congo, although there is a clear understanding that the resources extracted or the violence perpetrated in the name of the state actually benefit private individuals and pursuits, the right of these state agents to tax or use force is not questioned.

There is also a tendency for organizations that substitute for the state to fall short of radically challenging it and to end up contributing to its reproduction, willingly or not. It is necessary to stress here the vitality of associative responses to state decay in Africa. The state’s institutional resilience does not imply that Africans are not also resilient in the face of adversity. Across Africa, many people organize to mitigate the effects of state weakness on their lives, provide public goods, and establish bonds of social solidarity. There is adaptation; there is substitution; and there is resistance. Michael Bratton noted such vibrancy as early as 1989, stressing the increased instances of refusal to comply with the state since the beginnings of its economic crisis.19 Since then, much literature on Africa’s civil society and on patterns of disengagement or escape has stressed the innovative responses of Africans to state failure.20

Some have highlighted the numerous associative adaptations to Africa’s crisis, and the multiplicity of institutions attempting to exercise public authority across Africa.21 In numerous instances, these associations have been successful in providing public goods, even complex ones like environmental sustainability.22 There is also much evidence that Africans have stood up to their governments on many occasions.23 Commenting on the vagaries of the democratic movement in Cameroon, Célestin Monga has argued that a civil society has been vociferous and has posed effective challenges to the state for a very long time, manifested through informal groups and cultural practices.24
Yet, there is an apparent contradiction between the multiplicity of popular social experiments in Africa and the limited extent to which they end up undermining the state, which other authors have also observed. Richard Joseph, for example, has noted the “persistence of the modernist ideal of the nation-state in Africa despite the medievalist reality of multiple, overlapping political forms” on the ground. Writing on Cameroon, Francis Nyamnjoh has found it “curious that opposition parties, the media, the churches, and other associations have failed to capitalize . . . on the widespread inclination at the grassroots towards a more democratic social and political order . . . The bulk of Cameroonians want a change for the better . . . What, then, stops them from pursuing their aspirations in an organized and sustained manner, with or without violence?” In his study of coping mechanisms by Kinshasa residents, Theodore Trefon has shown the strength of popular inventions, yet simultaneously made clear the lack of significant political invention: “In marked opposition to their inventiveness for physical, social and cultural survival, the Kinois have proven themselves abysmally inapt with respect to transforming political discourse and political desires into political mobilisation.”

To some extent, therefore, there may be an exaggerated perception among scholars of the institutional decline of the African state and of the magnitude of the social and political reconfiguration it faces.

In much of Africa, associative life seems to have produced little erosion in the authority of the state, and little improvement in its accountability. Non-state actors frequently display what Bratton refers to as a “deferential attitude of dependency” vis-à-vis the state. Demands for greater state accountability are few or largely ineffective. In essence, associations do not fully become civil society. Few transformative political coalitions seem to emerge from the spread of associational life, and the state tends to maintain its ways despite associational activism.

Sometimes, nonstate actors experience difficulties in reforming the state because they do not appear to represent a credible alternative to its ways. They might even seem to embrace the logic of the state and mimic its authoritarian or corrupt ways. Augistine Ikelegbe notes that Nigerian civil society, for example, exhibits many organizational weaknesses, including corruption, a willingness to be co-opted, occasional reliance on state financing, and the absence of democratic values in internal structures and operations. In the DRC, the nebula of organizations regrouped under the umbrella network that calls itself “Civil Society” has a structure that broadly imitates that of the state, including a president and multiple administrative branches. As Lund puts it, “the idea of the state is . . . effectively propelled by institutions which challenge the state but depend on the idea of it to do so.”

When not copying the state, some nonstate actors use it to establish or support their own authority. As the work of Sally Moore in Tanzania shows, the development or assertion of local authorities and local community organizations often takes place in a competitive environment where disputes are frequent. Groups then often rely on government intervention to resolve these disputes, thereby reproducing state authority in their region, even as they attempt to substitute for it. Thus, organizations in rural communities tend not to mobilize in such a way as to challenge the state, but find it easier to increase their own local influence and power by aligning themselves with whatever is left of it. Implicit and explicit references to the state in local politics, and claims of state recognition in support of local displays of authority, are frequent. Often, local organizations also rely on official legal instruments to assert their local authority.

Christian Lund has found that conflicts between the Mamprusi and the Kusasi of Northern Ghana tend to revolve around state symbols of chiefly authority. One group typically asserts its hegemony over the other by claiming state authority through the display of symbols of sovereign statehood, such as the national flag, official stationery, rubber stamps, and other “administrative regalia.” Such practices were evident throughout the multiple episodes of state collapse experienced by Ghana in the 1970s and 1980s and promoted the peripheral reproduction of the state even when it had imploded at its core and despite unsettled local political relations. In northern Côte d’Ivoire, the state’s helplessness in confronting rising criminality in the early 1990s led to the transformation of traditional hunter associations—donzo ton—into “community guardians.” Yet, the government was nevertheless able to co-opt the donzo ton to make them work on its behalf. Crucial in this co-option was the donzo ton’s own desire to achieve “government recognition of the association as a legitimate private security organization.” The government went as far as providing hunting identity cards to “true” donzo. In Niger, Lund again shows that, like chieftaincies, hometown associations and vigilante groups embrace “the formal language of the state,” reproduce the territorial delimitations of districts, and rely on “ensigns of authority,” derived from the police and the prefecture in addition to resorting to other forms of legitimation. In Southern Nigeria, David Pratten and Charles Gore illustrate how organizations such as youth associations, vigilante groups, and area “boys” do not project a revolutionary anti-state message and seek in fact the patronage of local politicians. Lund notes that, “in this sense, they may come across as innovative and transforming yet conservative at the same time . . . paradoxically, they become part of what they depict as ‘exterior.’”

Finally, nonstate organizations sometimes simply refuse to challenge the state. Returning to the example of justice and peace commissions in the DRC, Tull again notes that, while they “are institutional innovations,” they do not want to substitute the state. These organizations are very explicit in that their para-judicial approach does not aim at replacing the state in the long run, for example in order to create an autonomous non-state sphere of collective action, sometimes depicted by observers as the “retraditionalization” of a
society that purportedly turns its back on a state that has deceived its expectations for too long... Time and time again, Kivu residents have affirmed to this author that they will not allow the state to abdicate its responsibilities... the idea of the state and the normative conception and functions underpinning it are apparently deeply rooted in a society.\textsuperscript{38}

Even large-scale organizations with a precolonial past, while largely resurgent since the 1990s, seem likely to refrain from challenging the state.\textsuperscript{39} The king of the Ashanti may be the head of his own quasi state, yet, as he made clear to the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) in 2005, “Some would think we are challenging the authority, but we would want to assure them that we are partners with them.”\textsuperscript{40} Such an attitude contrasts with the one displayed by his ancestor before the crystallization of the postcolonial state. In 1958, the Ashanti king had refused to participate in the ceremonies of independence of Ghana, complaining that it amounted to usurpation of his own sovereignty. In Uganda, where the Buganda kingdom has witnessed a remarkable resurgence since the early 1990s, its main demand has been to be further incorporated into the state through constitutionally recognized privileges and federalism, rather than compete with it.\textsuperscript{41} In general, “traditional” authority across Africa has more often partaken in what Richard Sklar has called “mixed government” than attempted to reaffirm a sense of historical legitimacy in contradistinction to the postcolonial state.\textsuperscript{42}

Practices of passive resistance and substitution to the state both eventually tend to contribute to its reproduction. Rather than undermining state authority or promoting more accountable state-society relations, local associative or “traditional” responses to state decay tend to favor the local reinforcement of its authority. The equilibrium properties of the weak African state transpire through this propensity of nonstate actors to reproduce it. For formidable as its resilience might be, it gets much help from others, including many among its apparent victims.

Rebels as State Custodians

While regular citizens, civil associations, and traditional chiefs might find it difficult to break away from the shackles of the state, one would at least expect rebels, insurgents, and other actors endowed with the tools of political violence to challenge the states that they fight. Yet, African rebels appear in general as conservative in matters of state institutions as everyone else. They might take issue with state authorities, but not with the authority of the state. Separatist or not, they typically do not embark upon institutional innovation; they rarely implement any substantive political project in the regions they control.

The example of the DRC’s Rassemblement Congolais pour la Démocratie (Congolese Rally for Democracy, RCD) is telling. As an insurgent movement, it had effective control of the two Kivus and large swaths of Haut-Congo and Katanga between 1998 and 2005. A large part of its political discourse called for a transformation of the state, particularly the introduction of federalism and the devolution of power and fiscal resources to the local level. Yet, as Denis Tull, who lived for several months in RCD-controlled territory, observed, “rumors suggesting that the rebels have engaged in a bottom-up process of reconstruction of the withering state administration do not stand up to any scrutiny... The RCD has simply taken charge of the administrative apparatus it found in place... [I]legal prescriptions and administrative procedures dating back to Mobutu... have been maintained.”\textsuperscript{43} This was true of the main RCD faction, which was in control in Goma. In the “Grand Nord” region of Kivu, where another faction of the RCD was in control, local rebels enforced the border with Uganda where they taxed cross-border trade, contributing to the maintenance of Congo’s territorial integrity. At the Kasidi customs post, rebels staffed OFIDA, the customs agency.\textsuperscript{44}

In Côte d’Ivoire, the Forces Nouvelles (New Forces, FN), who controlled the entire northern half of the country from 2003 to 2007 and whose leaders’ national identity had been questioned by the regime in power, not only maintained existing state agencies in their region but also celebrated national holidays on their own in the north.\textsuperscript{45} Although they announced the creation of new agencies and administrative sectors, these did not usually result in significant changes on the ground. The rebels actually participated in the national government in the south (although they did not often report for duty) while militarily holding the north. The conflict was largely resolved in 2007 when rebel leader Guillaume Soro accepted the country’s prime ministership, under the very authority of Laurent Gbagbo, the man he had been fighting since 2003.

In Southern Sudan, too, the civil administration of the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement (SPLM), after more than twenty years of significant territorial control, remained at best skeletal and well inferior in practice to what it was said to be on paper, before the apparent end of the conflict in 2005. For sure, the SPLM had some level of “a functioning civil administration throughout SPLA [Sudan People’s Liberation Army]-controlled territory,” particularly a court system based on customary courts, which might have compared favorably with what the Sudanese government had previously provided. Yet, Ken Crossley has argued that the SPLM gave little more than theoretical support to its own legal structures and that its bureaucratic structure “exists largely in name only.” Crossley also contends that the SPLM leadership showed little interest in creating a civil administration. Adam Branch and Zachariah Mampilly write that, despite some limited achievements, “the construction of a representative, inclusive, and autonomous civil authority has not
been essential, nor has the SPLA made a significant effort to build such a local
government.”48 In a later work, Mampilly contrasts the limited institutional
achievements of the SPLM with the much further-reaching reforms of the
Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka.49

Finally, even the few separatist insurgencies among Africa’s rebellions also reproduce the postcolonial state to the extent that they usually call for the
independence of their region on the grounds of past colonial existence. Separatist
movements in Eritrea, Somaliland, and Western Sahara, and to a lesser extent in Southern Sudan and Casamance, have all had for a primary goal the
restoration of a colonial space and have typically sought control of an administra-
tratively defined region rather than an ethnic one. They may be radical in the
extent to which they call for new states, but they are conservative in the extent
to which they base these calls on past colonial existence, which is the founda-
tion of nearly all African states. They do not challenge the African state sys-
tem; they want to partake in it.

Why Does the Authority of Africa’s Weak States Endure?

Whether it be the multiplicity of local agencies on the ground, the passive acqui-
session of citizens, the tendency for nonstate actors to invoke the state, the
collaboration of chiefs, or the mimesis of rebels, the equilibrium properties of
Africa’s weak and failed states fly in the face of expectations. In broad theo-
retical terms, we would expect the inefficiencies of African states to give rise
to other institutional arrangements. In a book entitled The Sovereign State and
Its Competitors, Hendrik Spruyt showed how material changes, anchored in
demographics and trade, gave the territorial state a comparative advantage in
Western Europe around the eleventh century over alternative forms of collec-
tive action.50 While his book made a compelling argument about the competi-
tiveness of the state, it also implied that changes in the material conditions
that were favorable to states could lead them to lose this competitive edge to
other forms of organization. For all practical purposes, sovereign territorial
states have largely demonstrated their incompetence in sub-Saharan Africa.
They have lost their institutional comparative advantage. As instruments of
collective action, they are at best dysfunctional, inefficient, and suboptimal.
Yet, as illustrated in this section, they do not generally seem to be threatened
by institutional competitors. On the contrary, although many alternative insti-
tutions rise to organize public life at the local level, provide basic services, fos-
ter community, and guarantee people a modicum of safety, the limited extent
to which these alternative institutions have actually reconfigured power and
challenged state authority has been astonishing. Africa defies predictions that
the “crumbling of one form of political order can reveal or give rise to the
emergence of new or incipient kinds of political order.”51 What explains

Africa’s institutional inertia and the maintenance of the hegemony of its failed
states over other forms of social organization and challenge?

A first level of answer might deal with the fact that there has not been much
time yet to properly assess the long-run evolution of the African state.
Some of what appears today as aimless institutional noise might well be the
precursor of greater and more fundamental changes to come. After all, Spruyt
documented an evolution that took three centuries, while African states have
only been independent for a few decades. While this is possible, two elements
mitigate against such an interpretation of institutional resilience. The first is that
contemporary African political actors tend to show lesser propensity for institu-
tional innovation than they did in the latter years of colonization or in the
early years of independence. Right before the waves of independence, there
were several attempts at innovation throughout the continent, including federa-
tion and the creation of intercolonial political parties, like the Rassemblement
Démocratique Africain in 1946, which united politicians throughout Francophone
West and Equatorial Africa. The development of the Rwenzururu King-
dom in parallel to the Ugandan state also dates back to the early 1960s. These
and other innovations were what Basil Davidson rightly calls “political initia-
tives of foresight and imagination.”52 They contrast with the relative lack of po-
itical imagination that prevails fifty years later.

The second is that rapid, discontinuous change does happen in history, par-
ticularly when states are weak. With the monarchy in deep decay, the French
General Estates led to the revolution of 1789, which ushered in massive politi-

cal transformation, both in the system of rule and the foundations of political
legitimacy. In comparison, the African national conferences of the 1990s, albeit
patterned after the general estates, did not bring about similar significant
changes in the nature of power in Africa, despite some other considerable
achievements.53 When the burden of taxation without representation became un-
bearable, the colonists in America rose in revolt against the British Crown and
invented their own political system, also laying down alternative principles of
political legitimacy. In Africa, potential holders of alternative legitimacy—be
they chiefs, churches, or civil society activists—tend not to rise in defiance of
the state’s endless extractions and predation. When the Soviet Union faltered in
1989, many of its constituent republics were quick to unilaterally proclaim their
sovereignty. In Africa, it is exceptionally rare for subnational units to do so, even
when beyond the repressive reach of the state (Biafra, Eritrea, and Somaliland
appear to be the only instances).

A second argument might invoke reasonableness. It is not necessarily the
vocation of every organization to displace the state, and economic or public-
good substitution may often be all that is reasonably needed. From this per-
pective, much is happening on the ground as people organize to mitigate the
negative effects of state failure, including through the private provision of ed-
education, health care, and some other public goods. It might also be unrealistic
to expect nonstate actors to become “new sites of potential sovereignty” in a world dominated by states. As Kingston has noted, “given the entrenchment of the state system in the twentieth century, it is now extremely difficult for such political entities to make the transition to statehood.”

While much of that is indeed reasonable, one would at least expect nonstate actors in Africa to contribute to reforming the state, that is, change the way power operates. With the state weakened and associative life strong, one could expect the state to surrender some ground to nonstate actors, and the latter to exert greater leverage on the former. Robert Putnam has shown, for example, how civic associations in northern Italy contribute to accountable state institutions. The rich literature on nonstate institutions in Africa, which posits disengagement or engagement as the two prevalent modes of political action, also seems to assume that, if Africans do not build alternative autonomous institutions of their own, they will at least promote a reform of existing ones. Yet, African state actors somehow remain immune to the consequences of widespread domestic institutional developments. Their authority seems to suffer no challenge. As for nonstate institutions, they neither fully disengage nor promote state reform, but rather cohabit with the state in what Achille Mbembe has referred to as an arrangement of “conviviality.” In doing so, nonstate actors, far from normative expectations of their reformist impulse, actually reinforce the equilibrium nature of Africa’s weak states. Adaptation and reaction to state failure do not lead to state reconstruction.

Pushing the argument of reasonableness further, one might also ask what can realistically be expected in terms of institutional innovation from poor people focused on day-to-day survival. It is true that poverty can be an impediment to social change. Yet, it must be borne in mind that change is usually initiated by elites, who retain a capacity for agency in times of crisis. Chiefs, regional politicians, civil society activists, opponents, or rebel leaders are not dissuaded from action by their supporters’ dire material conditions. In the case of rebels, at least, it is in fact equally likely that the poverty of their supporters will facilitate their enlistment in the rebellion. Paul Collier and Anke Hoeffler have provided ample evidence that the lesser the level of education of young men, the more likely they are to join rebellions. Whether this is a matter of opportunity cost or grievance does not affect the overall pattern. Poor or angry, a gun is not a bad thing to have. Moreover, the paradox is not so much that there is no political mobilization at all in Africa, which poverty might have explained, as the fact that its agenda is not typically focused on reforming the state. Recall from Chapter 2 that while the propensity for political violence is great in Africa and people are willing to mobilize for conflict, they just tend not to do so for transformative political agendas.

Even if fully aggrieved by state failure and aware of the necessity for change, it might nevertheless be rational for many not to challenge the state. In his seminal work on Exit, Voice and Loyalty, Albert Hirschman suggested that one can sometimes be dissuaded from leaving a transaction or a political situation because one would still suffer from its poor quality, from its negative externalities. For example, if public schools in my neighborhood were bad and I decided to pull my children out and send them to a private school, I would not contribute to improving the quality of public schools. As a result, I would still suffer from their negative impact on things such as local social capital and property prices. Thus, I might consider that I am better off leaving my children in and trying to mitigate their poor education by helping them at home with their school work. A similar logic might dissuade potential state challengers in Africa from actually challenging their states. Anyone thinking of starting, say, their own commune in the margins of the state, would be well aware not only of the continuation of a deteriorating environment around them (such as bad roads, health care, and the general lack of public safety), but also of the continued capacity of state actors to be a nuisance to them. Any rebels wishing to build up their own institutions would still be confronted with the effects of the remaining dysfunctional institutions of the state in the areas they control. The followers of any chief wishing to establish his political authority in the face of an illegitimate state would still have to cope with ineffective bureaucracies whenever they need essential documents for travel or education.

While such circumstances would indeed reduce one’s propensity for disengagement, we would still expect those who fail to exit to help reform the system. If I left my children in public schools, I might consider volunteering in the classroom or joining the parent-teacher association. In Africa, the puzzle of institutional inertia includes both the lack of exit and the lack of voice, the lack of alternative to the state and the lack of reform of the state. While Hirschman gets us on the right track, his analytical tool still falls short of capturing the comprehensive resilience of Africa’s weak states.

Third, we should bear in mind that there are some significant exceptions to the general picture of state resilience and social acquiescence painted in this chapter. Some countries have witnessed cases of more or less far-reaching institutional innovation, such as the largely autonomous Rwenzururu Kingdom of Uganda in the 1960s and Somaliland since 1991. Some local groups have risen to challenge the political legitimacy of the state, such as Bundu dia Kongo for the autonomy of Bas-Congo in the DRC after 2000, and, to a lesser extent, Buganda in Uganda after 1990. Some rebels have offered alternative modes of governance to that of the state they were fighting, like the National Resistance Army/Movement (NRA/M), also in Uganda, in the 1980s and after. I will come back to these in Chapter 6. At this point, however, while these cases serve as reminders that my generalizations about institutional inertia miss some significant variations, it must be stressed that they remain exceptions. For as salient and informative as they can be, they are rare. Given the
failures of the African state, the puzzle is that there are not more such radical initiatives. In part, their scarcity can be attributed to the continued repressive capacity of the weak state, as illustrated by the violent destruction of Bundu dia Kongo by Congolese authorities in 2007 and 2008. Yet, proximity to Kinshasa made this repression possible. In most cases, weak governments have a hard time deploying repression across large territories.

Finally, one could argue that weak African states endure because they have engineered legitimacy for themselves over time, irrespective of their lack of capacity. Joel Migdal suggests that “certain areas of state-society interaction can create meaning for people in society, and that meaning, in turn, can naturalize the state... People... cannot imagine their lives without it.” Public “rituals and ceremonies” provide one place where such naturalization of the state occurs, for they “connect the sacred to the notion of the nation and the mundane institutions of the state.” For anyone familiar with the propensity of African leaders to stage public ceremonies and other dramatizations of their power, this argument certainly resonates. Alternative elites, not tapped into the sacralized structures of state power, might find it more difficult to convince potential supporters to follow them. Yet, one should probably not take for granted the ease with which this argument assumes that people can be fooled all of the time. While there is plenty of evidence for the attachment of Africans to state structures, imputing it to their failure to imagine alternative scenarios is a bit akin to not explaining it at all: it’s all in their head. While there are cultural elements to state acceptance, there must also be some rationality to the endurance of failed institutions. Actors who appear to be on the losing end of inertia must somehow also benefit from it. For sure, the assumption of Africans’ participation in universal human rationality might be my own bias. Yet, it is one that I embrace without reservations, for it forces us both to treat Africans as equals and to maintain a certain explanatory discipline, which can otherwise too easily be evaded with unfalsifiable arguments about meaningful irrationality. To be clear, I do not disagree that the ritualization of praxis can create meaning that favors institutional stability. But I think such an argument must be embedded within a foundation of rational behavior to account for this very praxis.

In conclusion, there is no fully satisfying explanation for the enduring authority of weak and failed African states. Particularly puzzling is the widespread decentralization of this authority. States can crumble at their core, yet their agencies and personnel continue to project their authority at the local level, and, in general, citizens continue to acquiesce to it. How can the authority of the state survive the erosion of its governing capacity? What is it about the weak African state that allows local actors to continue to derive authority from it? Why do Africans tend to reproduce the state even as they seek to avoid it? Why are remnants of dysfunctional state institutions so appealing to rebels that they maintain them in the territories they control?

Notes

3. Herbst, States and Power.
8. See Seay, “Authority at Twilight.”
10. Amuri and Gourdon, “Etude diagnostic des organisations.” See also Airault, “Où va l’argent du cacao?”
15. GANVE, “La participation nationale.”
16. E-mail exchange with Reubens Mulenga, University of Lubumbashi, 1 June 2005.
18. Naira, the Nigerian currency. I am grateful to Katharine Boyle for bringing this point to my attention.
22. See, for example, Horning, “Madagascar’s Biodiversity Conservation Challenge.”
23. See Bratton and van de Walle’s emphasis on the role of protest in Democratic Experiments in Africa.
28. See, for example, Laakso and Olukoshi, “The Crisis”; Baker, Escape from the State; and Forrest, Subnationalism in Africa.
32. Moore, “Post-Socialist Micro-Politics.”
38. Tull, The Reconfiguration, 227-228.
39. Although I treat this topic here rather briefly, I presented substantial evidence in support of my claims in Englebert, "Patterns and Theories."
40. BBC News, "Yes, It's Good."
41. Englebert, "Born-Again Buganda."
42. Sklar, "African Politics."
44. Pole Institute, "Rules for Sale," 36.
47. Crossley, "Why Not to State-Build," 143 and 145.
49. Mampilly, "The Paradox of Plenty."
50. Spruyt, The Sovereign State.
52. Davidson, The Black Man's Burden, 184.
53. For more details on these conferences, see Chapter 4.
57. Azarya and Chazan, "Disengagement from the State"; Harbeson, Rothchild, and Chazan, Civil Society in Africa; Bratton, "Peasant-State Relations."
59. See, for example, Collier and Hoeffer, "Greed and Grievance."
60. Hirschman, Exit, Voice and Loyalty, 98–103.
61. On Rwenzururu, see Kasfir, "Cultural Sub-Nationalism," On Somaliland, see Bryden, "State-Within-a-Failed-State."
63. Ibid., 158.

Part 2
Sovereignty

Why do African peripheral elites tend to refrain from secessionism? Why do the members of Africa's oppressed or marginalized minorities not develop greater separatist aspirations? How do the decrepit and dysfunctional agencies of Africa's weak states retain authority? Why do many Africans seem to acquiesce to the abuses of states that provide them with few benefits? Why are nonstate actors, including rebels, inclined to reproduce the institutions and practices of these failed states?

Chapter 4 offers a theoretical framework for answering these questions. Its essential component is that, even when their financial resources dry up, states can still generate allegiance because their institutions and offices, widely distributed across their territories, continue to be the repositories of sovereignty. Domestically, state sovereignty manifests itself through legal command, that is, the monopolistic capacity of the state to order people around through the law. Local elites can acquire parcels of the state's sovereign powers by associating with its local offices, which they in turn can use to extract their own resources locally or to exert local domination. The exogenous origins of African sovereignty, deriving from diplomatic recognition rather than effective state-building, allow this power to endure even when the state is deeply decayed. The private extractive benefits associated with sovereign legal command are such that they typically dwarf alternative modes of accumulation and advancement, and bias political action away from challenges to the state and toward reproduction of its institutions, laws, and practices, even for peripheral and apparently victimized actors. In short, sovereignty provides holders of state office (at any level of the state) an internationally derived legal foundation, which is largely constitutive of the domestic authority of the state and of their subsequent claims for domination and extraction over their fellow citizens.

Chapter 5 provides illustrations of the sovereign bias in African politics by looking at groups that choose to remain loyalists and to refrain from