War, Markets, and the Reconfiguration of West Africa's Weak States

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In a recent book, I. William Zartman declares that Africa's "collapsed states" suffer "a long-term degenerative disease" and offers that "cure and remission are possible."[1] This and other analyses of conflict and declining bureaucratic capacity in African countries take the prevailing system of sovereign states as inevitable. Related "governance" approaches to African political economies often prescribe social and territorial boundaries of sovereign states. That is, they focus on the development of linkages between states and societies to increase taxing capabilities, identify a distinct public interest, and build competent bureaucracies accountable to popular needs.[2] Alternatively, readers are warned that "societal disengagement would, if carried out to its logical conclusion, result in the dissolution of the political community, as it has done in contemporary Somalia and Liberia."[3] But this conclusion is not true.

This essay explains why increasing numbers of African rulers opt for alternatives to bureaucratic, territorially bounded institutional arrangements.[4] I examine the appearance of the fragmented sovereignty of Liberian and Sierra Leonean "warlord" political units and the associated enclave cities of Freetown and Monrovia. To support their authority these new units have hired foreign contractors — foreign firms and mercenaries — to perform services formerly allotted to state bureaucracies. The term "political unit" reflects the ambiguous status of these new nonstate organizations and their divergence from norms of bureaucratic state organizations. None of them asserts exclusive control over internal groups, conforms to clear territorial limits, or fulfills a wide range of international obligations; they thus do not meet the classical "accreditation standard" for inclusion in international society.[5] Nor do they satisfy cold war standards of Third World sovereignty that supported self-determination within inherited colonial boundaries, bolstered with assistance from more powerful states.[6] This essay examines threats and resources available to rulers and their choices as they struggle to preserve and extend elite coalitions to support their political authority and fend off rivals. Rulers that survive develop alternative, rational forms of political organization suited to Africa's marginal position in the changing global political economy.

These rulers have found that changes in post-cold war distributions of economic resources and opportunities make patron-client politics based on foreign financial and political support unsustainable. Rulers now face threats from strongmen — state officials and powerful local notables — cut off from state largesse as aid and loans from former colonial powers dwindle or come with harsher conditions. Meanwhile, enterprising strongmen find that cultivating a personal following among people exploited in the past, especially youth, offers them better prospects for personal gain than does loyalty to old patrons. Recent economic changes also make commercial opportunities more readily available to assertive strongmen. Incumbent rulers discover that they must devise new ways to control these changes if they are to remain in power.

These new forms of political organization undermine economic development, lead to overlapping jurisdictions, promote conflicts among elites, and intentionally destroy bureaucracies. Equally important, they reflect efforts by rulers to manage disruptions of old internal political arrangements that follow from sudden shifts in the post-cold war international context. Innovations are also rarely efficient. This essay, however, takes currently existing political units in Africa seriously; it focuses on rulers' experimentation with innovative solutions to replace political arrangements that are no longer sustainable. Case studies from Liberia and Sierra Leone illustrate how new systems of rule emerge and why nonstate organizations displace sovereign states as rulers try to manage rapid internal and global change in ways that permit the survival of their regimes.

Marginality and Innovation

Recent neoliberal analyses of Africa's declining political economies often depict "emerging civil society" as filling in for incapable or illegitimate state bureaucracies. For example, some regard informal market organizations as adaptations of business classes that will eventually demand autonomy from corrupt states and move to protect their interests vis-à-vis state officials.[7] This shift in sovereignty from "a people's" territorial rights vis-à-vis the rest of the world to popular rights vis-à-vis predatory state interests may occur where relatively higher degrees of regime legitimacy and national identity exist, as in Benin and Zambia.

But social action, even when evading or condemning state power, does not signal the emergence of autonomous civil society and collapse of predatory state power. In Togo, Cameroon, and Kenya, for example, popular protests have met organized state resistance. Zaire's president Mobutu has manipulated and coopted illicit trade to finance his power,[8] intervened in ethnic battles to promote allies,[9] and claimed a growing share of French foreign aid amidst nearly total bureaucratic collapse to build new ties to subjects and external actors.[10] And in Liberia and Somalia, bureaucratic collapse and elite conflict have not liberated society from oppressive state power. Instead, they have cleared the way for individual state officials to regain personal power through new arrangements with internal and external actors.

In this context it is difficult to label activities that chip away at state bureaucratic power as "state" or "nonstate." For example, the illicit financial activities of Malian *marabout* and entrepreneur Mohamed Cissé, confidant of Benin's former president Kérékou and former associate of Zaire's President Mobutu, weakened bureaucracies while strengthening the rulers' powers.[11] Is Djily M'baye — Ivoirian commodity trader, Sierra Leone kola nut kingpin, confidant of Senegal's president Diouf, and advisor to late Ivoirian president Houphouet Boigny — an agent of state power or a private businessman?[12] Should UNITA be understood as Angolan rebels or as Mobutu's commercial collaborators? Are Somalia's "warlords" social actors in a sovereign vacuum or elites of a defunct state pursuing domination by alternate means?

Noting the difficulty in distinguishing between private and state power in some contexts, Migdal avers that "the state is not a fixed ideological entity . . . it embodies an ongoing dynamic, a changing set of goals, as it engages other social groups."[13] Development, or more generally using bureaucracies to organize people and production more efficiently, is not necessarily the most rational basis to exercise power in these settings of elite conflict. Ayoob, for example, observes that African rulers protect their regimes by controlling strongmen at the expense of popular legitimacy or definition of a distinct state interest.[14] A ruler's personal survival is often at odds with the task of building strong state agencies.[15] Migdal notes that some officials destroy state bureaucracies to deny power bases to potential rivals.[16] *Contra* Huntington, the appearance of leaders who seek stability amidst crisis through abjuring bureaucratic institutions shows how political authority can be built in radically different ways. Bayart's image of a "familial state" captures the diverse networks of power in Africa that stray from conventional notions of distinct categories of state power and interest.[17]

The configuration of political authority provides a basis to explain the transformation of the process of building political units in places where old strategies for maintaining weak states in Africa are no longer viable. What Bayart calls "transcontinental sociability" distinguishes dominant elite coalitions from lower levels in a hierarchy of groups. He notes that elite mediation between internal and external forces extends well beyond recognized formal juridical and territorial boundaries of state action. For example, Ivory Coast's late president maintained ties of marriage to leaders throughout western Africa.[18] Shifts in such regional and local elite relations are integral aspects of comparisons of recent transformations of state power. Especially after the cold war this continental social hierarchy faces new threats. Incumbent rulers, strongmen, leaders of commercial networks, and foreign contractors vie for the right to wage war and make alliances. Rivals enjoy easier access to weapons, further weakening state control of coercion. Distinctions between public and private and between domestic and external became even more blurry, belying notions of political organization that presume distinct bureaucratic states ruling mutually exclusive jurisdictions.

Changes in the character of these informal avenues of elite power also have dramatic implications for the exercise of power in political units that retain more conventional state-like features. This situation recalls Piault's notion of historical "rupture," in which previous arrangements become unsustainable.[19] Similarly, Braudel distinguishes between a history of events and the *longue durée.*[20] In periods of global stability, as in the cold war, rulers adapt to a more predictable pace of change with incremental adjustments. For example, financial support encouraged some rulers to align with a superpower to resolve internal security threats within existing norms of interstate behavior, while using this income to build informal patron-client networks.[21] The apparent strength of Marxist-Leninist variants of state organization appealed to others as a way to manage ethnically divided polities.[22] Under the guise of economic planning most rulers put state bureaucracies to work at the task of accumulating and distributing patronage to elites. Rulers also found that cold war superpower patrons put a premium on maintaining inherited colonial entities and conforming to specific rules and norms that otherwise constrained their latitude of action.

Recent post-cold war changes in global commerce and politics threaten African rulers. Economic decline and the growing dominance of Bretton Woods institutions as lenders of last resort have left rulers at the mercy of lender priorities.[23] Mandatory economic reform programs in return for loans cut patronage from state bureaucracies. Subsequent declines in patronage encouraged some enterprising strongmen to organize personal followings among citizens who bore the brunt of austerity. Meanwhile, a flood of cheap light weapons has democratized access to violence. Guns in the hands of young men once at the bottom of patronage hierarchies provide what one youth called "the Kalashnikov lifestyle," the right to loot for a living.[24] Strongmen who can arm and control such followers use this firepower to build their own commercial and political networks.

West Africa's Multiple Trajectories

In this internal reordering of politics old rulers who survive find that they must continue to interact with more conventional states. But the transformation into new types of political units changes rules of the game for stronger states, too. For example, rulers who struggle to manage changing political orders create a demand for South African, former Soviet, and Nigerian fighters for hire. A new breed of foreign firms adept at operating in chaotic environments also appears. Rulers of states from which mercenaries or speculators hail are likely to tolerate their activities. South Africa's postapartheid rulers, for example, found that footloose corporations and mercenary firms helped boost South Africa's economy because they exploited commercial opportunities elsewhere in Africa that more conventional firms dismissed as too risky.

Even though creditors, foreign allies, and local citizens may pressure hard-pressed rulers to adopt effective bureaucratic strategies, the cases below show that their innovations in the exercise of authority served largely their own political interests. This surprisingly large capacity for experimentation and adaptation with the help of outsiders indicates that rulers of very weak states have a greater measure of autonomy to shape internal and external political arrangements than is commonly expected.

This capacity recalls Tilly's observation that shifts in European politics after 1500 forced rulers to manage social conflicts while finding ways to fend off new threats.[25] Innovations in warfare first equipped princes to keep rivals at bay. Related political measures later created economies of scale, giving princes successful in this new organization of warfare greater autonomy from cities and feudal coalitions. States then grew at the expense of other political units. As in Africa now, new political arrangements emerged as an outcome of rulers' efforts to manage rising internal and regional threats. But for a time diverse nonstate organizations such as the Ottoman Empire and the Hanseatic League adapted and held their own in Europe's emerging state system.[26] Likewise in Africa there is no reason to expect that one political form will triumph over another at the start of global shifts in economic and political power.

As seen in West Africa, changing patron-client politics and post-cold war shifts are integral to explanations of variations in new political coalitions and the rise of novel political arrangements. For example, rulers may use creditors' insistence on "privatization" to grab state assets to favor a particular faction.[27] This political choice undermines economic efficiency and weakens administrative capacity and legitimacy. But it also denies resources to rivals. Abandoned clients, in turn, find new ways to build their own power at the expense of their old patrons. Thus, what at first glance is stop-and-go economic reform may in fact signal battles between rulers and strongmen to control wealth and the use of violence.

These local efforts to manage broad post-cold war changes weaken bureaucratic state institutions but leave available to rulers and strongmen alike a wider range of informal and illicit means to pursue their interests. Thus, external politics are central in understanding internal shifts. Just as postcolonial state rulers manipulated economic policies to buttress elite political networks, rulers continue to rework the logic of markets and manipulate the interests of external agents. This rational pursuit of power can translate into extortion from aid organizations, manipulation of drug and diamond trades, profit from forced labor, "official" looting operations, and control of markets through alliances with new foreign commercial partners.[28] The success of these innovations in sustaining rulers, in turn, influences the strategies of other watchful rulers who face their own unruly rivals. An understanding of these innovations and the role that outsiders play in making them work helps explain why a wider variety of political units exist in Africa today than before the end of the cold war.

These variations in crisis management and its corollary, political entrepreneurship, show that evolution toward idealized state forms and distinct spheres of state and civil society is unlikely among Africa's weakest states. Indeed, external efforts to promote them, insofar as they increase rulers' internal threats, prompt more intense and innovative crisis management. Rulers facing pressures from creditors, for example, destroy politically unreliable bureaucracies in the name of austerity. They contract out official functions to outsiders who arrive at the behest of creditor-sponsored foreign investment programs, freeing themselves to attack rivals and use violence to extract resources from people under their control. This example shows how recent global change does not necessarily favor economic efficiency or mass mobilizing territorial states. Some subjects can resist and force limits on what they will tolerate. Involved foreigners bring their own interests to this dynamic. In the cases below, rulers manage these groups, often at the expense of less pressing (and more conventional "statist") concerns.

Reconfiguration Outside Norms of Sovereignty: Liberia

At the head of his fifty man National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL), Charles Taylor invaded Liberia in late 1989 and eventually won control of much of Liberia, portions of Sierra Leone, and frontier zones of Guinea and Ivory Coast. Internally, Taylor has conducted a vigorous trade in timber, minerals, and agricultural products with help from a wide array of foreign investors and regional commercial networks.[29] Since mid 1995 he has ruled his domains from Monrovia as part of a coalition government that institutionalized the division of Liberia's territory and trade between Taylor and several rivals. The survival of his politically and commercially distinct organization, however, remained significant.

Taylor's most pressing concern has lain in controlling rival strongmen, not just territory. Taylor remained wary of rivals and quickly punished signs of independence or wavering allegiance among his associates. Himself an associate of former Liberian president Doe, Taylor has also faced other strongmen from Doe's patron-client network who aspire to power. Many of them struggled for power after the United States government made clear to Doe in 1989 that it would no longer finance his regime's hold on power in return for access to military and communications bases. One of Taylor's rivals, Prince Johnson, kidnapped and killed Doe in 1990. Eager to avoid a similar fate, Taylor gutted bureaucratic structures in territory he occupied to deny a power base to potential rivals and replaced them with his own followers. Taylor has used loyal partners, especially relatives, to manage the apex of this organization. He also attracted youths, especially from among long oppressed Mano and Gio ethnic groups, whom he encouraged to attack rival Krahn and Mandingo communities. This strategy has mobilized fighters from among those exploited by past regimes.

Within the context of his concern for security, Taylor logically blurred boundaries between administrative and military organizations. His use of armed youths tapped the interests of those long excluded from declining patron-client networks. "Eating in the bush is better than starving in Monrovia," commented one fighter, who made clear that he saw his new occupation as a sign of upward mobility.[30] Meanwhile, NPFL fighters "taxed" trade in food for personal benefit. This pattern of recruitment indicated that Taylor manipulated scarcity and access to goods to extend his authority and used raiding to buy off politically dangerous groups with promises of plunder.

Taylor has offered loyal fighters rights to inflict violence. Targeted areas were valuable insofar as they provided loot.[31] For example, Taylor's brother, Gbatu, organized the plunder of the abandoned German-owned Bong Iron Ore Company.[32] Logging for foreign buyers also produced income through forced relocation and labor of targeted groups.[33] Taylor's control over violence also shifted market forces in ways that helped build a local coalition of interests. Disruption and scarcity after 1991 gave him the opportunity to impose his own currency and border controls, providing himself and his allies with opportunities to profit through personal control of trade and management of scarcity.[34] But accumulation through local exploitation is limited and offers only short-term access to foreign exchange to pay for imports, especially weapons.

Partnerships with foreign firms and regional trade networks helped solve this problem. Taylor exploited anxieties among European mining firms concerned about access to assets and iron ore deposits in NPFL areas to lure them back to Liberia to provide foreign exchange and arm his fighters as a cost of doing business.[35] He also played off competing European firms in an iron ore mining project astride the Guinea-Liberia border to raise money and manage external interference in his affairs. A British company allegedly paid Taylor $10 million a month to ship stockpiled ore to keep a railroad to the site open.[36] A French state-owned firm also allegedly bought ore from him in 1991.[37] Taylor's deals with firms complicated international efforts to cut off his financial and arms networks. For example, before 1995 Taylor cultivated fears of declining French political influence among French firms to counterbalance a United States-backed Nigerian military intervention to end fighting between him and his rivals.[38] Flexibility to appeal to different private interests has been especially important as French firms strengthened ties to his Nigerian enemy's petrochemical industry.[39] This French move complicated Taylor's efforts to cultivate ties with his pro-French neighbor, Ivory Coast. His earlier efforts paid off, however, when NPFL-held areas became France's third largest supplier of tropical timber in 1991.[40]

Royalties from foreign trade underwrote Bong Bank, a quasi-private operation run by Taylor's brother to collect logging royalties and manage a "Forestry Development Authority" overseeing logging contracts. This organization allegedly received arms from overseas suppliers.[41] Logging operations lent Taylor the opportunity to incorporate Ivoirian and Americo-Liberian commercial networks into his organization. Prominent Liberian timber firms logged in NPFL areas, despite continuing fighting between Taylor's forces and political allies of these prominent businessmen from the capital. The Americo-Liberian ties also incorporated ethnic Lebanese-run enterprises along the frontier of neighboring Ivory Coast. Like foreign firms, ethnic Lebanese traders have little capacity to recruit popular followings and therefore must cut deals with local strongmen to stay in business. Ties to these businessmen denied resources to rivals and further linked Taylor to elements of Ivoirian political-commercial networks.

Taylor's control over cross-border trade has been critical in financing his military organization and generating more sustainable commerce. Allegations circulated that NPFL and Ivoirian officials benefitted from cross-border trade.[42] One progovernment Abidjan paper noted that "Charles Taylor's soldiers are fully at ease in Ivory Coast where they do as they think fit, of course with the complicity of the Ivoirian army."[43] This collaboration continued arms for timber swaps that allegedly occurred in the 1980s between Ivoirian and Liberian officials through regional Lebanese trade networks.[44]

Taylor has used other tactics that emphasize control over people and commerce, rather than territory, on the western marches of his realm. Cross-border trade developed in 1990 between Taylor's fighters and Sierra Leone border guards. But NPFL-sponsored commerce threatened local Mandingo traders with ties to the old Doe regime. This shift in cross-border trade also disrupted arrangements between individual Sierra Leonean officials who dabbled in the illicit diamond industry in Sierra Leone with Mandingo partners.[45] This disruption, in turn, denied Sierra Leone's president control over clients' access to patronage. Taylor pressed his advantage by recognizing and aiding a dissident former Sierra Leone army officer, Foday Sankoh, as leader of the Revolutionary Unity Front (RUF) and "Governor of Sierra Leone." With NPFL backing, Sankoh's operation recruited marginalized groups, especially young illicit diamond miners with grievances against the Sierra Leone regime and its clients, and threatened the Sierra Leone government.[46]

Taylor's Liberian opponents also have manipulated external alliances and local violence. Former Doe associate George Boley, head of the Liberian Peace Council (LPC), cultivated ties to the U.S.-supported Nigerian peacekeeping troops, who saw him as a proxy to control Taylor's power.[47] Boley's fighters also oversaw export operations. A Monrovia journal reported, for example, that 6,000 LPC captives worked the formerly American-run Liberia Agriculture Company rubber plantation near Buchanan. Liberian export statistics show substantial increases in rubber exports from Buchanan since the port fell under LPC control.[48] LPC fighters also regulated local movement, charging residents to collect food and selling "exit visas" to travelers.[49]

Boley also attracted newcomers to his organization. He appealed to the youth of various ethnic groups to, in one fighter's words, "cut the Big Men down to size."[50] Boley's more independent strategy may have arisen from his access to arms as a proxy of Nigerian forces. Taylor, on the other hand, faced strains with external allies, especially since the death of Ivoirian president Houphouet Boigny in 1994 and more recent Ivoirian official concern that weapons supplied to the NPFL have returned to their country in the hands of criminals and unruly Ivoirian strongmen.[51] Taylor has thus sought alliances with a broad range of commercial networks that provided access to foreign exchange.

Taylor's innovations, slimming down and reworking of fragments of old patron-client networks, and selective incorporation of new partners marked a significant political shift. Both Boley and Taylor built political support among youth. Taylor called himself Ghankay, or warrior, and distributed "official" tee shirts bearing the message "Ghankay is OK" to young men. More important have been his connections to Ivoirian, Liberian, Sierra Leonean, Guinean, and other commercial networks. Boley's operation also showed signs of exploiting a resource base to support a following, while, for example, working with private Nigerian airlines to strip the port of Buchanan of its assets.[52] Allegations point to Nigerian military complicity in a vigorous drug trade involving Liberia and Nigeria.[53] Complaints from more powerful states were muted, as much of this "warlord trade" involved the Nigerian proxies that non-African politicians had hoped would provide a cheap and politically safe way of resolving the Liberian crisis without direct intervention.

Are these developments of non-state-like organizations isolated? Are the political units they create sustainable? Rational rulers of weak states do not invariably pursue conventional state-like strategy to deal with new threats. Evidence from Sierra Leone, Liberia's western neighbor, shows that activities of Taylor's nonstate organization next door have created incentives for the weak Sierra Leonean state ruler to mimic innovations of his warlord neighbor. Ironically, pressures from creditors and aid organizations on this and other sovereign but weak African states promoted rulers' experimentation with alternate forms of political authority as they grappled with internal security and broader economic challenges.

Reconfiguring a Weak State: Sierra Leone

The Taylor-backed RUF attacked Sierra Leone territory in 1990, threatening the regime of then-president Joseph Momoh. By 1991 RUF fighters occupied and exploited the country's eastern diamond mining areas. Momoh's strategy to cope with this threat was to expand and strengthen state bureaucracies that had long harbored and financed presidential patrons. For example, Momoh tripled army enlistment to 14,000.[54] But the April 1992 coup by twenty-six year old army captain

Valentine Strasser showed that the greater threat to Momoh's regime lay in the president's inability to control his own state's bureaucracies. State agencies no longer offered Sierra Leone's rulers viable tools to counter security threats.

First, rebel fighters captured the country's diamond mining areas. Diamonds had long provided the bulk of state revenues and political payouts. Momoh thus lost his primary means of financing a larger military while buying off strongmen who would otherwise be tempted to launch rebel-style looting or illicit diamond mining operations. State payouts to clients were already declining with implementation of a harsh structural adjustment program after 1991, which laid off 15,000 workers, 40 percent of the country's civil service.[55] Much of the savings went to debt service. The president, anticipating future loans and aid for his war against rebels, could hardly neglect the demands of these western-backed creditors. Social service spending in 1992 fell to 15 percent of levels a decade earlier. Revenue collection decreased, from 30 percent of GNP in 1982 to 20.6 percent of a lower GNP in 1992 as part of creditor-sponsored efforts to reduce corrupt state intervention in the economy.[56] It came as no surprise that Strasser cited official neglect of soldiers and corruption among officers when he overthrew Momoh in 1992.

A second threat to Momoh's old patron-client arrangements lay in the new opportunities for private gain available to enterprising strongmen. Momoh's own military officers and political associates mobilized disgruntled farmers and soldiers exploited by past regimes to mine diamonds. Those who did not join these new networks faced "sobels" — soldier-rebels — along with RUF fighters engaged in looting.

While creditors encouraged Momoh and then Strasser to destroy remaining state civil bureaucracies, Strasser realized that the lack of new resources under his personal control made one seemingly indispensable state organization, the military, unmanageable and left its officers to adopt rebel strategies. The Taylor-backed RUF was the catalyst that forced Strasser to reshape unsustainable patron-client politics. Ironically, Strasser's adaptation of creditor strategies to reduce and bolster formal state institutions played a key role in his struggle to reconfigure political authority to manage rivals, while presiding over a near total collapse of state institutions.

Strasser desperately used foreigners to fight his internal rivals. Exasperated creditors had already introduced Momoh to contracting out state operations. In 1991, for example, Specialist Services International (SSI) came to Freetown to manage the port and collect customs. As part of a broader privatization exercise, creditors concluded that the German-run SSI would provide reliable revenues to service debts. Momoh collaborated in this destruction of a critical function of sovereign states—autonomous revenue collection — because he knew that this bureaucracy harbored elements of a former president's political network beyond his control. Similar arrangements governed collection of the country's ocean fishery royalties.[57] Creditors were reassured about revenue collection. Momoh used foreign firms to deny resources to rivals. But critical for Strasser's choices later, state bureaucratic capacity did not grow. In fact, it shrank.

Not surprisingly, while Strasser's government has devoted more than half of its budget to the war against the RUF, it has pursued economic "reform" programs.[58] Denied local bureaucratic means to tax, Strasser needed creditors' "clean bill of health" to attract foreign aid and investors to bolster revenues and fund his war against rivals. U.S.-owned Sierra Rutile, until attacked by rebels in January 1995, was a major source of foreign exchange. This company also provided its own security and social services within its 224 square mile concession zone. Concerned about unregulated marketing of Sierra Leonean diamonds, DeBeers promised hefty royalties in return for an exclusive offshore mining agreement with Strasser's regime in 1995.

Weak state sovereignty after the cold war no longer guarantees external military or financial support to state bureaucracies to battle armed rebels and control militaries composed of disgruntled youth and others long marginalized in postcolonial politics. However, formal sovereignty offered Strasser some help from outsiders to disband threatening bureaucracies that harbored these unruly subjects and increasingly independent strongmen. Again, innovations aimed at other problems took on new functions. Priorities of increasingly spendthrift creditors and foreign states ultimately supported Strasser's strategy of contracting out customary state functions to foreigners, since Strasser's backers regarded the alternative — a rebel victory — as undesirable. Foreigners representing both state and nonstate organizations supported Strasser as an interlocutor of his increasingly shadowy state's relations with the rest of the world. They preferred Strasser to illiterate young men with no specific political program who looted for a living. Creditors and aid organizations colluded in "privatization" of the war as long as it prevented the debacle of a rebel victory. Creditor support of an apparently cooperative Sierra Leone government totaled $120 million in debt relief. World Bank and bilateral donors offered another half billion dollars in aid over several years. Internally generated revenues were roughly replaced with aid.[59] Meanwhile, foreign aid, added to foreign firm expenditures, freed the president from using state institutions to provide social services. U.S. food aid helped feed a third of the country's people in 1994, for example.[60]

Costly interventions in Bosnia and Somalia have made outsiders more likely to accept Strasser's strategy of crisis management in Sierra Leone. They have recognized that his removal by field commanders friendly with rebels could bring fighting to Freetown. As easy opportunities for looting in the countryside disappear — one-third of the country lives as refugees — fighters might be tempted to sack Freetown. Creditors and aid organizations would face a recurrence of the violence and collapse of centralized authority that hampered their operations in Somalia. Their interest in order has also posed a threat to Strasser. Foreign partners would likely cooperate with any military successor to him who was committed to continuing external forms of state sovereignty and internal access to profits for commercial partners, rhetoric notwithstanding.

The post-cold war proliferation of private military forces for hire, particularly among postapartheid South African and former Soviet forces, offered Strasser and his backers a chance to extend the accommodations of more conventional business operations in Sierra Leone. In contrast to a state army, mercenaries are more likely to remain loyal to their employer in state house and not to build independent local power bases. Sierra Rutile's use of Frontline Security Services to protect its concession area eased Strasser's contacts with this military force. Joined by Gurkha Security Guards, Ltd., this firm received a contract in late 1994 to help reverse rebel advances. Gurkha Security Guards, Ltd., however, worked with Strasser's formal military command, a fateful mistake. The depths of factional division became evident when "sober" forces killed the Gurkha's commander and Strasser's *aide de camp.* This incident played a large role in the firm's February 1995 decision to leave Sierra Leone. The murder of a mercenary Ukrainian helicopter pilot in army headquarters in Freetown a month later confirmed that threats to Strasser lurked within the formal military command. So dire were the implications of the Ukrainian pilot's murder that Strasser's spokesman explained it as a suicide over a failed love affair.[61]

Executive Outcomes, a military force of South African veterans and former Rhodesian Selous Scouts replaced departing Gurkhas in April 1995.[62] Ironically, soldiers of apartheid, without a local power base of their own, were a rational choice for a hard-pressed African president to confront his internal security threat. Unlike their Gurkha predecessors, Executive Outcomes' employees allegedly fought Sierra Leone army personnel they encountered in combat, who along with RUF fighters they considered enemies of their patron.[63] Executive Outcomes delivered diamond mining areas to Strasser's control in July 1995 after a series of battles using Russian helicopters.[64] Their weapons and autonomy from local political struggles lifted Strasser above dangers of Sierra Leone's broader factional politics. He was also left vulnerable to challenges from members of his regime who profited from the foreign partnership.

This partnership brought a joint venture between the Sierra Leone government and a Bahamian firm owned by the same Pretoria-based parent firm as Executive Outcomes. Freetown rumors speculated that DeBeers paid for Executive Outcomes' operations.[65] It is more likely that Executive Outcomes' South African parent foots the bill for military services in anticipation of future diamond mining profits. As an added benefit to Strasser, now diminished rebel diamond mining dislodged Lebanese traders that Sierra Leone strongmen and their allies relied upon to help mine and market diamonds outside Momoh's and then Strasser's control. Strasser's strategy permitted the direct exploitation of diamond resources with the aid of more reliable outsiders while reducing payouts to now less threatening strongmen. Both the mercenary and foreign investor strategies point to the growing role of South African firms on the continent after the fall of apartheid, itself a product of the cold war's end.[66] The Sierra Leone case reveals a wide range of formal and informal roles for external actors — among them Strasser's and Taylor's foreign backers — that exploit changes in post-cold war global commerce.

The End of Africa's Sovereignty Game?

The new political units lack clear de facto boundaries yet prove sustainable in the midst of crisis. Overlapping and contending organizations claim jurisdiction in them. They are extremely dependent upon outside patrons, especially newly prominent contractors, but also can autonomously manipulate and play off the interests of outsiders. Their development signals a significant reconfiguration of the subordinate "quasi-state" status of African states that once relied upon stronger state supplies of aid and guarantees of territorial rights vis-à-vis the rest of the world. To determine whether these nonbureaucratic political units can survive in a world dominated by bureaucratic states, it is necessary to examine the consequences of the presence or absence of innovation for the character and viability of this type of political unit.

Intensified internal exploitation is connected to regime survival. Crisis management of rulers and would-be rulers detaches political authority from the institutions, risks, and costs of the weak state and reduces the state's significant if uneven commitment to some citizens. This trend is likely to continue where creditor demands for austerity involve massive civil service layoffs, as in Sierra Leone. Promises from Zairian prime minister Kengo to trim that country's civil service from 600,000 to 50,000 will further undermine conventional state organizations there.[67] Catechisms of reform — of free markets and reduced government — applied by rulers facing extreme internal security threats, as in Zaire, recall more basic political priorities of the early colonial catechism of *mise en valeur.* Rulers devise new ways to control strongmen, discipline subjects, and put them to work to accumulate wealth at the cheapest possible cost. Both Taylor and Boley, as officials in past Liberian governments, had some (minimal) interest in maintaining a distinct state organization. But now their fate is less meaningfully connected to the fate of a public realm in the sense of serving the interests or caring about judgments of more than a handful of clients and allies. Accumulation to finance control over commerce and people now overshadows concerns with development.

Crisis managing rulers in weak states struggle for the widest possible control over economic interactions. International borders and internal bureaucracies become expensive liabilities, especially when targets of control are regional commercial networks. Likewise, they ignore truly marginal areas. In Liberia, for example, factions have abandoned to armed youths the looted and depopulated sections of Lofa county, far from trade routes with Sierra Leone. In Zaire, President Mobutu has controlled mining and logging areas and manipulated aid to Rwandan refugees irrespective of international borders.[68] To the extent that territorial control can be mapped, political units based upon violent accumulation center on archipelagos of control rather than contiguous terrain. Rulers of these political units make little effort to cultivate popular loyalty.

Sustainability is a major issue in assessing claims that these political units represent synchronic alternatives to states in Africa. Taylor's introduction of his own currency and Boley's restriction of trade in areas under his control show that they take threats of flight and evasion of their authority seriously. Strasser's difficulty in disciplining officers and regulating diamond mining reflects his struggle to control the area's largest source of wealth without relying upon his own increasingly threatening countrymen. These strategies attract enclave mining firms which fill in for productive subjects. However, foreign allies may consider Strasser and Taylor expendable, if successors are committed to controlling commerce for mutual benefit. While foreigners help rulers maintain discipline among subjects and pare down old patron-client networks, rulers face incentives to pare back even further to reduce the chance that more ruthless and efficient rivals will be more appealing partners to foreigners. The greatest security threat to rulers, like Strasser, with remnant bureaucracies lies among anxious strongmen within ruling juntas, who fear being cut out of deals with foreigners.

These new political units are also not clearly compatible with each other. Warfare among them arises over contested jurisdictional claims. Recent peace accords among Liberian strongmen are not likely to endure for long. Populations face conflicting demands from contending organizations. Competition to extend economic power makes it difficult for outsiders and neighbors to discern where the limits to authority are located. Conflict among these units is therefore contagious. The propensity for conflict, while intensifying pressures on neighboring rulers to innovate, also threatens stability among such political units. But where rulers perceive that the power capabilities of these new political units match or exceed a regional community of weak states, alternative power configurations become more attractive and the need for mimicry and innovation becomes more urgent.

The viability of the new political units depends on resolving the problem of exit and discipline where the pursuit of power undermines continuity and calculability. Here, the special role of the foreign contractor marks a fundamental shift in the rules of African interunit politics. Whereas the "quasi-state" of the postcolonial era was built with resources provided by more powerful states, weak post-cold war African states attract external partners who expect high profits in exchange for services rendered and risk incurred. This new arrangement intensifies exploitation of subjects and further removes political authority from them. Contractor partners, in turn, help enforce discipline for those unable to leave and reduce consequences of exit for local rulers where they directly take over productive activities.

Contractor mediation between African political units and global markets shows strong affinities with political alliances that predate the cold war's end. Executive

Outcomes' operations in Angola, for example, allegedly used Inkatha units and exploited contacts with Mobutu when this firm worked for a rebel group there.[69] Changes in the Nigerian role in Liberia demonstrate how President Abacha manipulated commercial ties between army commanders and Liberian strongmen to reward and punish his associates. Partial United States financial support for Nigerian troops in Liberia and reluctance to see the collapse of a framework for a Liberian peace agreement allowed Abacha to hedge on U.S. threats to sanction his repressive regime. Of course, state actors' decisions can still upset arrangements with foreign partners; Abacha decided to meet with Taylor as Nigerian corporations broke into the Ivoirian petrochemical market previously dominated by French investors.

Overall, structural supports for Africa's weak states remain. Global "good citizenship" and strategic interests of stronger states still provide resources if not entitlements for hard-pressed leaders. Stronger states' fears of disorder ensure nominal support for territorial integrity. But official noninterventionism toward Africa, along with the pressures and opportunities of the post-cold war world, fundamentally changes the rules of internal and interunit politics for weak states. African economies and political units continue to be engaged in global commerce and politics, albeit now in more unconventional and violent ways.

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