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Contested politics in Africa:
the state, identity and resources

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RECENT EVENTS in Africa have highlighted the continuing prominence of identity politics on the continent. Many African countries have experienced conflicts since gaining their independence in the 1950s and 1960s. Since then, politicians, analysts and academics have developed theories and methodologies in an attempt to understand these conflicts in order to create sustainable peace and development. One accusation levelled against existing paradigms is that not all stakeholders' needs are addressed in the post-conflict reconstruction process. This brief examines the state, identity politics, and the struggle for resources in Africa. Identity includes ethnicity, race, gender, religion, sexuality, kinship, geographic location, age, class, nationhood, cultural preferences, and occupation; but for the purposes of this paper it will be confined to ethnicity and religion because those categories are often touted as the main protagonists of conflict in many areas of the world, for example, the Middle East, the Balkans and the Horn of Africa. Identity politics is defined as politics arising out of shared experiences of injustice, but also shared experiences of privilege where the group with access to power protects its position in the system at all costs.

During post-conflict reconstruction, the dominant group determines who is included, or marginalised, in most modern states. Most commonly though, the main parties involved in peace talks exclude women and marginal groups from the political table for reasons that range from cultural to logistical. This brief contends that identity politics obscures the real reason behind exclusionary practices, namely the struggle for and access to resources. It uses the recent conflicts in Côte d'Ivoire, Sudan and Chad to illustrate how initial identity tensions laid the foundation for a struggle for access to resources that has re-ignited violence in those societies. It also argues that if identity politics is constructed as the main cause of conflict on the continent, then all stakeholders should be involved in peace processes to ensure that the peace is viable and sustainable. More importantly, to address the root cause of conflict, peace debates should move beyond the usual rhetoric about political representation towards a socio-economic system that affords all parties and individuals the right to dignity and a life free from poverty.

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The state and identity politics in Africa

The contemporary African state is a colonial, political construct that was imposed on societies that were based on kinship, geographic location and access to resources. The concept of the 'nation-state' is a contested entity in Africa because it has struggled for legitimacy, capacity to deliver and has been used as a tool to create 'nationhood', which implies a geographical area with a single national identity. Instead, the imposition of the colonial state has resulted

in 'de-rooted states' that have lost the connection between the people and their institutions. Eghosa Osaghae argues that 'it is in the context of the de-rooted state that notions and structures of the common good, nationhood, citizenship, public morality, legitimacy, accountability and transparency have malformed, been lacking or fiercely contested'.[1] The post-colonial state holds the monopoly of power and the ability to distribute that power mainly to its supporters, to the detriment of democracy and peace in the country. As a result, patron-client relationships govern the way the state does business, manifested by elite groups' hoarding power and resources to aid their own objectives.

In many cases, colonialism produced weak African states characterised by centralised power systems, with very little respect for democratic principles and disinterested in distributing resources to all its citizens. State institutions were also overly bureaucratised, especially in the ex-British colonies where a bureaucratic class was established to take over the administration of the state immediately at the end of colonial rule as a form of indirect rule. At independence in the 1950s and 1960s, more than 50 percent of civil service posts in West Africa (Ghana, Nigeria and Sierra Leone) were held by Africans, and only 10 percent in East Africa.[2] In contrast, Francophone Africa's civil service, because of the assimilation principle, was not domesticated to the same degree as in Anglophone countries. The end of colonialism meant that power was handed over to the new rulers, mostly nationalist movements. Immediately after independence, state power was tenuous. Institutions needed to be consolidated in order to create a viable post-colonial state. Unfortunately, in many cases, political elites opted to secure their own positions within this vulnerable institution rather than dispense socio-economic development to the citizens. In this regard, the state was a means for elites to enrich themselves and to consolidate their power base in society.

Despite the handover at independence from the colonial administration, African colonial subjects did not become citizens in the transition from colony to independent state.[3] Consequently the state remained separated from its citizens. Osaghae asserts that this 'de-rooted' state has contributed to a number of pathologies, among others, a lack of faith in the ability to deliver development to its citizens and 'violent ethnic and religious conflicts'.[4] These consequences are not unique to African states because they are common among countries in which the state is contested. The post-colonial state in Africa was characterised by the 'limitation of political pluralism to small enclaves, the strong emphasis on statism and bureaucratic structures, the politicisation of administrative institutions, and personalistic forms of decision-making'.[5] Political elites provided resources to their client electorate and cronies, personalising institutions even further.

Due to the colonial history of state institutions in Africa, elites usually came from the same identity group as the political leadership. Kinship, ethnicity, religion and gender, among other things, formed the basis for collaboration and support in the state. Identity became a political tool for contesting power and resources rather than a source of difference within the society and was used to clearly delineate between those who were included and those excluded from state power. Colonialism, and other forms of incursions, for example, by Arab traders, disrupted 'indigenous' African identities. Because identities are inherently fluid and multiple, they can be socially manipulated for instrumental purposes. As argued earlier, the state in Africa did not arise organically, but instead was imposed on a pre-existing social structure that was irrevocably changed.

Identity politics became the main tool to determine who was included or excluded from state power and access to resources. In many cases, a client base was necessary to keep politicians in power and, therefore, that base became more important than delivering development to the general citizenry. 'The reasons and motives [for the upsurge in the wave of identity politics] are enmeshed in a web consisting of neglected historical grievances, land claims, ingrained biological prejudices, religious fervour, sudden memory-lapses, long-standing battles for recognition and criss-crossing all these elements and bringing them into the boil, new and old struggles for power'[6]. Identity politics provides a space in which people can reinforce their belonging and ownership, or lack thereof; however, identities have generally been used negatively by colonial powers and ruling elites in the post-colonial state. Alternatively, identities could be used to create a universal identity, as in the case of nationalism and a search for a common identity in African countries, or more broadly, in Africa as a continent.

African countries have to determine how they can manage identity differences that appear in political spaces, but should do that within the broad ambit of human rights, access to resources, equality and citizenship.

Battle for resources

In order to redistribute resources, such as access to political power, business deals, political office and so forth, it is important to note the constraints facing the continent. Resources in

Africa are stretched to their limit due to unfavourable weather patterns, overpopulation in urban areas, overgrazing in rural areas and states' penchant for cash crop economies to participate in the global economy. The post-colonial state in Africa has been complicit in the resource struggle because it has participated in the global economy on highly unfavourable grounds. The neo-liberal market economies that are superimposed on African countries set standards for interaction that produce unequal trade relations and limit development opportunities. Europe and the United States of America have open access to African markets and set the parameters of the relationship. Single cash-crop economies, extractive industries and low-level manufacturing industries maintain Africa as a marginalised partner in the global economy.

At a national level, this system establishes a hierarchy of power based on identity politics. 'Ethnicity arises in the exercise of power'[7]; therefore ethnic identity only arises when groups perceive a loss of power or gain power and need to protect their position in relation to the state. The state cannot deny identity politics or reject it but should instead consider policies that acknowledge differences and address inequalities within the society. Resource struggles arise because of perceived or real shortages: if a group perceives itself to be denied or is denied resources, it will resort to identity politics in an attempt to raise consciousness within and about the group. Three recent cases of 'ethnic' violence come to mind.

Côte d'Ivoire

Côte d'Ivoire gained independence from France in 1960 and was ruled by Félix Houphouët-Boigny until 1993, when he was ousted by a bloodless coup. The Côte d'Ivoire conflict arose as a result of a contested 'national identity and citizenship, uncontrolled cross border migrations, porous borders, struggles for scarce resources and politicised ethnicity.'[8] In the post-colonial period and given rising global demand, President Houphouët-Boigny adopted a policy that attracted land workers from the general west Africa region but especially from neighbouring Burkina Faso and Mali, and from inside Côte d'Ivoire, to work in the coffee and cocoa belt. This led to acquisition of land by non-locals and resulted in conflict about ownership of and access to land. In an effort to appease the indigenous groups, Houphouët-Boigny offered them positions in the civil service, which led to a client class based on patronage from the government.

After Houphouët-Boigny's death, Henri Konan Bédié took over the presidency and adopted the concept of *Ivoirité* (Ivorianness). This politicised identity included all Ivorians who were 'pure' and excluded those of 'mixed' decent. 'Mixed' Ivorian identity included those people who were of Arab decent because of the origins of one or both parents; in other words, they were not indigenous by birth. The concepts of a 'pure' or 'mixed' identity assumes an essence of being that can only be achieved through birth, which is highly unattainable in a country that has undergone decades of a locally settled colonial administration. Northern Muslims lost their Ivorian identity while people in the Christian south maintained their national identity. The north was also deprived of public services and public administration. Anti-foreigner rhetoric marked Ivorian politics in the 1990s and ultimately led to the renewal of ethnic violence. Burkina Faso has been implicated in the Côte d'Ivoire conflict owing to the importation of labour from that country. The conflict spiralled when identity cards were issued to citizens who were 'pure' Ivorians. Muslims in the north and any other 'mixed' groups were prohibited from voting in the 1995 and 2000 elections as a result of a narrowed concept of who was a citizen. Ironically, the new electoral code disqualified Allassane Ouattara from running for president in 1995 and 2000 because his father was allegedly from Burkina Faso and he was a northerner.

Ivorian identity, religious, geographical and ethnic, has been politicised to the extent that citizenship in general and northerners in particular have been negatively affected. Northerners have very limited access to resources because the state has declared them non-citizens, although there are attempts to address this in recent peace accords. Civil society groups have referred to the systematic exclusion of the northerners from work, resource allocation, education, and so forth, as 'cultural genocide'.[9] Resource allocation in Côte d'Ivoire is intimately linked to identity and location, a situation that the state has actively promoted.

Sudan

Similarly, in the Sudan, the conflict between the Islamic Janjaweed and the Sudanese government on one side and non-Islamic Sudanese rebel groups on the other has resulted in a protracted civil war in the Darfur region. This followed one of Africa's longest civil wars between the north, dominated by Islamists and elites of Arabic descent, and the south, which is populated by black Africans. Superficial analysis provides evidence that supports the argument that religious differences are the root cause of the violence. Closer inspection shows that the struggle for resources set an already volatile

situation aflame. Desertification, drought and overpopulation have led to contestations for living space, water, firewood and agricultural land. In addition, external demand for oil has also exacerbated the conflicts in certain regions as local communities violently challenge the state's relationship with oil companies and its unequal disbursement of oil revenues. China's economic interest in Sudanese oil has also influenced the Sudanese government to increase its sale of oil to that country but not to redistribute the revenue to all Sudanese.

The struggle for resources has entrenched the geographical and religious differences between the people of north and of the southern territories. Threats to restart the war have arisen because nomadic Arab groups have cut down trees in the non-Arab southern region to feed their camels. In June 2007, United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-moon argued that climate change was behind the conflict in the Sudan as groups contested limited agricultural and grazing lands and water.[10] This is one of reasons for the conflict; another is the abuse of power by the ruling National Congress Party, formerly known as the National Islamic Front, that sided with Arab sectors of the Sudanese society. The state, under Omar al-Bashir, placed great value on Arab identity at the expense of the other identities in Sudan.

In 1989, a military coup led by Al-Bashir overthrew the elected government and divided the country into the north/south configuration evident today; but it was not until the 1990s that ethnicity became the raison d'etre behind the conflict. Resource-conflicts have only emerged lately, but are also due to the fact that the society has been ethnically divided by a state that thrives on conflicts between identity groups. The Janjaweed has exerted violent power over the other groups in the Sudan, and more especially in Darfur. The term genocide characterises the level of violence in the Darfur region; however Alex de Waal argues that this 'is the routine cruelty of a security cabal, its humanity withered by years in power: it is genocide by force of habit.'[11] The crisis in Darfur goes beyond identity politics and the struggle for resources into a realm which bears witness to an unstable and insecure elite and a society with gross inequalities of wealth and power.

The war in the Sudan and especially Darfur has particular relevance to the immediate region as Chad has also experienced instability as a result of both countries' involvement in each others' conflicts.

Chad

Chad has had four coups since its independence from the French in 1960. The country was divided into rival fiefdoms in the 25 years following independence. France has remained involved in the instability as it provided arms to former President Hissène Habré and to the incumbent, President Idriss Déby, who fought against Libya's occupation of Chad and pushed Libya's proxy Arab militias, the Janjaweed, out of Chad into Darfur. It is simplistic to argue that the Chad war is a proxy of the Sudanese conflict as it is in fact the reverse.[12]

The latest conflict broke out in the streets of N'Djamena, the capital of Chad, in the early weeks of 2008. Rebels were attempting to oust Déby, who had in 2005 unilaterally changed the constitution to extend his rule into a third term. In 1990, Déby came to power by military coup with the help of the Sudanese and French governments and, in 2006, held elections in which the opposition did not participate and he declared himself the winner. The rule of law collapsed in the subsequent period. The state is a contested space as it is not a multi-party democracy – notwithstanding the existence of more than 70 political parties – but one of factional warfare that aims to maintain power at all costs. It is important to note that the Sudanese government has backed Déby and thereby extended Sudan's war into Chad. The conflict in Chad has been labelled a 'proxy war' of the conflict in the Sudan. More nuanced analysis shows that the porous borders between Sudan and Chad have facilitated many of the same ethnic divisions and political problems in the two countries. Khartoum has supported Chadian rebels fighting Déby. The rebels are situated on the porous and violence-infested border, and are related to the nomadic Arabs causing mayhem in Darfur. Déby himself has supported black African Darfurian rebels who are also part of his powerful ethnic group called the Zaghawa. The nomadic Arabs and the Zaghawa live on both sides of the border, which leads to the exacerbation of the spillover of conflict in the region.

In addition, oil, which was discovered in 2003, plays a significant role in Chad's instability. The Déby government has set aside its promises to distribute oil revenue equitably and to earmark certain sectors for socio-economic development, such as education, healthcare, agriculture, and a future generation fund. The Déby administration has marginalised the voices of the people and as a consequence civil dissatisfaction has become the order of the day. The French have also played a double role as protector of the state and its own broader economic interests. Oil interests also exacerbate the patron/client relationship in Chad as American companies such as

Exxon Mobil and Texaco, and the Asian group Petronas, vie for favourable policies from the government. The conflict in Chad is a combination of the backlash from civil society against oppression and inequality and outside pressure from Sudan and France. Oil is vital to the income of the country and, therefore, external and internal forces have fought to maintain control over the oil industry and oil revenue. Alex de Waal argues that, in analysing the Chadian conflict, the things to watch are the individual leaders, their ethnic affiliations and their backers.[13]

Kinship and ethnicity are not central in the Chadian conflict, yet ethnicity has been so politicised and valued that it is hard to separate it from the power struggles currently going on. Chad's eastern border area has a centuries-old history of internecine and intercommunal violence, sometimes following ethnic lines. The constant causal factor for this violence has been competition over resources between sedentary and nomadic peoples. Déby's patronage is disseminated in return for narrow elite support for his government, while oppression and violence are potentially meted out against civil society, which seeks civilian rule as an alternative to the military-dominated rule of Déby's administration. Resources are more important as the struggle for land ownership and oil revenue is complicated by neighbouring countries and foreign oil companies.

Search for peace

Intra-state conflicts could be attributed to resource shortages; hence, negotiations for political representation alone cannot culminate in peace. If peace talks revolve around the battle for resources, much needs to be done to ensure that the socio-economic system is reconstructed to provide services to citizens and also that the system of state patronage is eradicated. Peace talks, therefore, have to address the nature of the new social, political and economic system that will prevent future resource-based conflicts; conflicts are not caused solely by identity politics but also by the struggle for resources.

Many debates about conflict resolution are based on the role of identity in conflicts. Identity does play a role in conflict situations, but identity tensions are usually the symptom of a deeper cause for concern. The colonial state set the blueprint for identity divisions in Africa that have been exacerbated by the politics of reward in the post-colonial period. Owing to leaders providing supporters, especially those from the political elite class, with material and power-based resources, perceptions of scarcity and preferred groups arise among the citizenry and lead to catastrophic results, as seen in Côte d'Ivoire, Sudan and Chad.

Peace processes, therefore, have to be cognisant of the deeper causes of conflict in specific contexts. In all the examples cited above, ethnic tensions arose due to a political system established on notions of patronage and clientelism. Nuances are often brushed over as they obfuscate the real issues and lean towards issues typically addressed by post-conflict negotiations: ethnic tensions, identity politics and genocide rather than the reconstruction of resource distribution within the afflicted country. Negotiations have to move beyond identity politics towards a system based on citizenship and equality for all. Adedeji argues that 'sustainable peace has proved elusive in many cases largely because of the failure to comprehend fully the complexity of the forces that brought about the conflicts'.[14]

Prevalent peacekeeping methodologies have erred on the side of identity politics as the main perpetrator of conflict and therefore pay more attention to identity during the conflict resolution process. In many places where communities are ending conflict and forging peace, ethnic identities and cultural and political practices exclude certain groups, more especially women and marginal groups, from public debates. Either the dominant religion or traditional practices decree that one ethnic group is the dominant group that holds political power; that women should remain in the private space of the home; or arrange for political processes to remain at the level of 'significant players', thereby excluding the smaller stakeholders.

This brief contends that conflicts in Africa, and in many other parts of the world, might have emerged due to the imposition of the nation state on pre-colonial structures that led to initial identity tensions; but analysis of current conflicts has pointed to more complex reasons. The word 'genocide' has been used in reference to the violence in Côte d'Ivoire and the intra- and interstate wars in the Great Lakes region and the Sudan. Discourse that limits the debate to a simple explanation based on identity politics preludes inclusion of other more nuanced translations of the conflict. For peace initiatives to work, the debate needs to delve deeper in order to begin to explore how the distribution of resources, wealth and power is effected within political systems.

Peace talks, mediation and other methods of resolving conflict, such as the United Nations' Peacekeeping Missions, cannot address the redistribution of wealth or resources if their main aim is to bring the warring parties to the negotiating table, create peace and begin to explore potential models

for sustaining the peace. One model that could be used is Richard Sklar's 'developmental democracy' that argues for 'democratic participation, constitutional liberty, social pluralism and economic efficiency.'[15] Many conflict-inflicted states struggle with most of these ideals. Kofi Annan, in his Agenda for Development, also states that peace (meaning democracy) and development are 'closely interrelated and mutually supportive'. For African nations to flourish, democratic development, security, stability and economic growth should be instituted and constitutionally protected. Regional Economic Communities (RECs) also have a role to play in this regard as it would prevent conflicts from extending beyond national borders. In the case of Sudan and Chad, the conflict could spill over into the already volatile Great Lakes and Horn of Africa regions and create a scenario Africa could ill-afford. Renewed violence in Côte d'Ivoire could destabilise a region that has just begun to find its feet after years of war.

Recommendations

The main argument of this brief is that more equal resource allocation is necessary to secure peace and democracy within Africa. The following recommendations are made to various stakeholders in this regard:

National

- Policy makers should ensure that policies are directed at decreasing wealth and power discrepancies in the state. States should return to the basic tenets that led the liberation struggles, namely democracy, redistribution of wealth and equality;
- identity politics should be addressed through constitutional rights and redistributive development;
- politicised identities need to be deconstructed and devalued. They could be made unimportant through an even-handed approach to an inclusive national identity; and
- policies should include discussions on developmental democracy or the developmental role of the state in an effort to highlight guidelines that would address inequalities.

Regional

- Regional Economic Communities (RECs) should pay close attention to spillover conflicts in regions where historical tensions have existed for many generations. Efforts should be made to find regional solutions that address economic development for the region, peace initiatives that consider equally regional resource inequalities and identity tensions; and
- special attention should be paid to border zones in which identities have been split by colonial borders.

African Union

- Oil is of great significance in regional and intra-state wars. The international community should, therefore, ensure that oil (and other resources) and oil revenues are protected by international law for future generations. National states have the obligation to protect their natural resources and to ensure that oil revenues are equitably distributed for broad-based socio-economic development; and
- special attention should be paid to conflicts that cross national borders. In this regard the AU should re-examine the current stance on colonial borders especially in the light of the Union of Africa debate.

United Nations

- Peacemakers should adopt a holistic framework when dealing with conflict on the continent. The framework should be cognisant of the legacy of colonial structures, but not maintain that colonialism bears the sole responsibility for the African states' malaise. The significance that identity politics has in conflict generation; the role of external agents in perpetuating conflicts and tensions; and the strategic importance of resources, especially oil, water and land, in the ignition and resolution of conflict must also be taken into account. ■

Endnotes

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