POLICY OUTLOOK

Africa's Big States:
Toward a New Realism

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Big African states are among the least successful on the continent. Countries with a combination of a large land mass and a sizeable population tend to be chronically unstable politically. They perform poorly economically, despite the fact that many are quite rich in natural resources and all have internal markets that should be capable of supporting economic growth. They have been among the least successful in overcoming the early postindependence legacy of single-party or military regimes and in moving toward democracy. Forty years after independence, most are still struggling to find a political system capable of holding together their diverse populations without constant strife.

Nigeria, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Ethiopia, Sudan, and Angola together account for about 40 percent of the population of Sub-Saharan Africa. As a result, their chronic internal problems have repercussions that go well beyond their boundaries. The disintegration of the DRC has had particularly devastating consequences, affecting all the neighboring countries and even pulling in some farther afield, such as Zimbabwe. Sudan and Ethiopia have been engaged in a dangerous game of meddling in each other's civil war for decades, greatly contributing to the instability of the entire Horn of Africa. War in the southern Sudan has a spillover effect in Uganda. Angola, which has the potential for rapid economic growth, instead exports refugees to neighboring countries. And Nigeria, which aspires to play the role of benevolent hegemon stabilizing West Africa, perennially teeters on the verge of an internal collapse that would have devastating consequences beyond its borders.

The only true exception to the uniformly negative picture presented by the big African states is South Africa. Though still facing a host of major socioeconomic problems, South Africa is a functioning state, with the strong administrative system and the transport and communication infrastructure that allow modern states to implement policies, collect taxes, and deliver services in return. The unity of the state is not contested by its citizens. Although the dominant role of the African National Congress is a matter of concern, hampering true political competition, the country has developed a political system that is much more stable and democratic than is the case in other large states.

To be sure, many small states in Africa are also performing poorly politically and economically. And the domestic conflicts of some smaller states, for example, Liberia and Sierra Leone, are intertwined. More often, however, the problems of smaller states have little spillover effect. Somalia ceased functioning as a state over a decade ago, but its neighbors are not suffering as a result: Ethiopia, in fact, is probably better off, finally free of Somali claims on the Ogaden region. Furthermore, small and medium states in Africa do not present a uniformly bleak picture. Several are showing improvement in their economic and political performance. Although there are no truly consolidated African democracies yet, the countries that have made most progress are small or medium sized.

The international community has been extremely reluctant to intervene decisively in big African states. The same factors that make these states so dangerous—their size and the resulting particular complexity of their problems—also make the idea of intervention daunting. Confronted with conflicts that have caused hundreds of thousands of deaths over a long period of time, the international community has offered endless mediation but very little concrete help. Outsiders have also kept aloof from many conflicts in smaller countries, including the 1994 massacres in Rwanda that cost well over half a million people their lives. However, there have been examples of interventions in smaller states. At present, there are some 13,000 UN peacekeepers in Sierra Leone, which has a population of 5.7 million, but only about 10,000 peacekeepers in the DRC, which has a population ten times as large. The various UN missions to Angola in the 1990s were chronically understaffed and underresourced; Margaret Ainstee, who led the mission at the time of the failed 1992 elections, quipped, in reference to UN Security Council Resolution 747, that she had been expected to fly a 747 with only enough fuel to power a DC-3. If a peace agreement is finally signed in Sudan, as appears possible at the time of this writing in January 2004, the United Nations will have to mount a major peacekeeping operation to ensure the success of the agreement. A robust intervention, if it were to take place, would represent a significant departure from previous reluctance to engage decisively in big states.

The international community needs a new approach to the problems of large African states. Allowing their problems to fester, the case all too often in the past, is a source of continuing hardship to their citizens and neighbors alike. The theoretical commitment to the territorial integrity of these large states does not help them stay together. Classic UN or other international interventions are almost impossible in large countries, because the resources of personnel and finances required are prohibitive, sapping the already scant political will of the possible intervenors.

Analyzing Dysfunctionality

Africa's big states, with the exception of South Africa, are dysfunctional politically, economically, and socially. In the present conditions, these states do not serve the interests of their citizens, their neighbors, or the broader international community.

Despite the advantage for growth that large states with large domestic markets should theoretically enjoy, Africa's three most populous countries—Nigeria, Ethiopia, and the DRC—have average per capita income under $300 a year, virtually unchanged in the last twenty years and representing a substantial decline in real income and living conditions for most citizens. Yet, Nigeria and DRC are mineral rich countries, and oil production in Nigeria has increased and continues to increase rapidly. Such per capita income is well below the average for Sub-Saharan Africa, which has increased slightly to about $1,000 in the last twenty years. Even more striking, per capita income in countries with less than two million

inhabitants has shown steady if unspectacular growth for the last fifteen years and now tops $2,000. Including other indicators of welfare, such as those measured by the UN Human Development Index, only confirms the conclusion that big African states do very little for the welfare of their citizens.

These states have not been much kinder to their leaders, and small states are not dramatically different in this regard. Although some of the leaders have amassed huge fortunes while in power, most have not been able to remain in power very long and have been removed from office by force rather than by regular elections. Sudan and Nigeria top the list, each with eleven leadership turnovers since 1960. The DRC had eight turnovers, concentrated in the initial years of the republic and after 1998, with a long stretch under Mobutu Sese Seko in between. Ethiopia has experienced five turnovers. Only Angola has managed to avoid turnovers—when the first president died of natural causes, succession took place within the party. Even the opposition movement UNITA had unusually stable leadership under Jonas Savimbi.

The most serious dysfunctionality has affected the state itself. The big African states have so far not succeeded in establishing political and administrative systems capable of coping with the challenge posed by their size. They remain poorly governed and even more poorly administered.

The political failure has received the most attention. It is reflected in the civil wars that have afflicted all five countries at some point and continue to afflict the DRC and Sudan. Angola was at war from its independence in 1975 until February 2002, and the situation has barely stabilized even now. Ethiopia experienced war in Eritrea from the early 1960s until 1991, with conflict spreading to other regions during the 1980s. The conflict only ended with the recognition of Eritrean independence in 1991. Nigeria experienced civil war from May 1967 when the Eastern Region declared independence as Biafra until January 1970, when the defeated Biafra was reintegrated in the federation. War in the DRC started in 1998 and continues, notwithstanding multiple agreements and ongoing discussions. Sudan may be on the verge of an agreement to end the war that started in 1983—the second round of a conflict whose first round lasted from 1956 to 1972. Even if the agreement is signed, however, the problem of Sudanese statehood will not be solved for good. Six years after the signing of the proposed agreement, Sudan is supposed to hold a referendum in which citizens will decide whether the country will remain united or whether the south will secede. The fact that neither side has been defeated militarily adds to the possibility that the conflict will resume.

These conflicts reveal the failure of big African states to reconcile their internal political, ethnic, and religious differences and to establish a political system capable of accommodating the demands and interests of various groups. It is these internal failures, rather than the interventions by outsiders pursuing their own agenda, that explains the instability of the big states. Angola became the theater of a proxy war between the United States, allied with South Africa, and the Soviet Union, relying on Cuban personnel, only because the dissension between its leadership provided outsiders with an entry point. When the outsiders withdrew following a 1988 agreement, the war continued as a domestic phenomenon.

Nor can the conflicts in these states be attributed solely to the ambitions of specific leaders. Although all the countries have had their share of ruthless strongmen, conflicts have extended past the political life span of any individual. Angola may be the exception here.

UNITA, the armed opposition group in Angola, was so dependent on its leader Jonas Savimbi that his death spelled the end of the fighting. It is too early to tell, however, whether Angola will be able to develop a system of government that can turn the cessation of hostilities following Savimbi's death into a real peace and economic and social development.

Even in countries where wars have ended, the development of a political system that can address the underlying problems has been elusive. Indeed, all the civil wars in big African states have ended by a military victory, not by a political agreement. In the aftermath of war, both Nigeria and Ethiopia have experimented with federal formulas in an attempt to prevent the conflict from recurring. Neither Nigeria's territorial federalism nor Ethiopia's ethnic federalism have solved the problem, however. In Angola, a government flush with its success is still trying to avoid real political reform, assuming that UNITA's disarray after Savimbi's death will allow it to win an easy victory in the forthcoming elections. The Angolan government, in other words, is still hoping it can build an internationally acceptable political façade without changing much.

The administrative failure of the big African states has received much less attention than the very obvious political failure, but the problem looms as large. Big African states do not control their territory well, do not have adequate administrative structures, and thus encounter serious problems in implementing policies and delivering services. None of the big states discussed here has been able to administer its entire territory effectively and in a sustained way over time. Despite the often decried bloating of the civil service, big African states are today even more "underadministered" than they were in colonial days. In the most extreme case, that of the DRC, it is not only the administrative infrastructure that has disappeared, depriving the population of services and leaving unpaid teachers, civil servants, and soldiers scrambling to survive, but the transport and communications infrastructure has disappeared as well. Restoring administration in big states at this point requires road building as much as civil service reform.

Big States Try to Face Their Problems

Some of Africa's big states have made a conscious effort to devise systems of governance to deal with the challenges posed by size and diversity. Others have simply ignored the problem. None has so far found a satisfactory solution likely to last.

Angola. Angola has systematically ignored the challenge of size. In keeping with the Portuguese legacy, the Marxist tradition of the early years of independence, and later more simply with the ingrained authoritarianism of the leadership, the country has been governed in a highly centralized manner. Angola has been painfully slow in adopting any kind of reform, either political or economic. The true impact of a centralized and bureaucratized system will become more evident if the country remains at peace and the government is forced to turn its attention to its long-neglected socioeconomic problems. The DRC has also failed to deal systematically with the governance challenges imposed by size. Theoretically, it has a centralized system; in practice, there is no authority exercising power except in limited areas. The result is a medieval mixture of local fiefdoms and contested territories, not a decentralized modern state.

Nigeria, Ethiopia, and even Sudan, in contrast, have sought to address directly the problem of how to govern a large, diverse state but have not yet been successful in devising a lasting solution.

Nigeria. Nigeria, at independence a federal state composed of three large regions, has tried to refine the federal formula since the end of the Biafra war. It has repeatedly increased the number of states, which now number thirty-six. It has adopted a constitutional clause, subsequently copied by other African countries, that stipulates that a presidential candidate must show nationwide support by winning at least 25 percent of the vote in two-thirds of the states to be declared the winner. It has tried to provide representation for all major groups in the civil service and cabinet posts. It has tried different formulas for the distribution of the oil revenue, most recently increasing the share that goes directly to state and local governments. None of these steps, however, has provided a real solution. Increasing the number of states has eliminated the danger of a direct confrontation among large regions, but it has not eliminated traditional divisions. There is no longer a predominantly Muslim northern state, but there are now twelve states in the north and center of the country that have incorporated *sharia*, in a fundamentalist interpretation, in their laws. Increasing the number of states has not eliminated discontent. With several hundred different languages spoken in the country, the number of groups that could demand their own state is virtually endless. Similarly, the revision of the oil revenue distribution has not quelled the discontent of the population of the oil-producing Niger Delta. The new formula has also likely created the incentive for the formation of new states and led to the decentralization of corruption rather than to more accountable government.

Ethiopia. Ethiopia has also made repeated attempts to deal with the challenge of size and diversity. A loosely structured feudal empire until the twentieth century, Ethiopia started directly confronting the problem of how to become a modern state after World War II. Emperor Haile Selassie tried to develop a formal bureaucratic administration, but it remained quite thin on the ground, never extending below the district level and leaving local communities to the authority of landlords and traditional authorities. Selassie also tried to develop a common Ethiopian identity and culture by making Amharic the language of instruction and government. In feudal style, he also tried to bridge domestic divides by carefully building a network of intercultural marriages for the royal family. It worked for a while, but when the emperor was deposed in 1974, the country started, quite literally, to fall apart.

The new Marxist-oriented military regime sought in theory to set up a centralized, party dominated system. The outcome was disastrous. The regime did not have the tools to control the politically centralized and economically centrally planned system it envisaged. With the help of the Eritrean insurgents, ethnic liberation movements developed throughout the country. When the military regime was defeated by the Eritrean and Tigrean movements in 1991, Eritrea seceded, leaving the Tigrean insurgents to find a means to govern the divided country. The outcome was a bold experiment with ethnic nationalism. Ethiopia became a federation of ethnic states with a considerable level of autonomy. Following the example of the Soviet constitution, the Ethiopian constitution recognizes the right of nationalities to self-determination, even to the point of secession—and it remains to be seen whether such a right would be respected in practice any more than it was in the Soviet Union. The system is held together by the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front, a Tigrean-dominated amalgam of the ethnic parties of each region. The system has been successful in keeping together a country that in 1991 appeared headed for disintegration, but unity in the country remains somewhat precarious.

Sudan. Sudan has wavered since independence between attempts to deal with the discontent of its southern population through repression and attempts to devise a federal solution. In

1972, Sudan adopted an asymmetrical federal system, with a northern government ruling the entire country and the south having limited autonomy. In 1983, President Jafaar Nimeiri tried to break up the southern region into three provinces less threatening to Khartoum, and war resumed. The conflict was made worse when a radical Islamist movement took over in Khartoum and declared *sharia* the law of the country, including in the non-Muslim south. A second agreement, again giving autonomy to the south, may be in the offing, but, as argued earlier, it does not even claim to provide a definitive answer.

South Africa. It is worth considering briefly the case of South Africa, the only successful big state in Africa. Despite the size of the country, South Africa considered but rejected a federal solution. There are two explanations for this. First, the apartheid regime had attempted to maintain minority control by setting up ten independent homelands that would be united to white South Africa in a "constellation of independent states." The attempt failed but also left a legacy of suspicion of decentralization. Second, the country already had a strong unitary system in place that allowed limited power to four large provinces—the original states that were merged in the Union of South Africa following the South Africa (Anglo-Boer) War of 1899–1902. With a functioning system in place, it was easier for South Africa to continue along the same lines, although increasing the number of provinces from four to nine, each with an elected legislature and premier. At the same time, the South African government was also able to use the central control to equalize spending across the territory, transfer revenue among levels of government, and monitor the fiscal performance of the provinces. Arguably, South Africa was successful in part because it rejected extreme decentralization.

International Community Faces Big States

The international community has not dealt with big states as a separate category requiring a special approach. Rather, it has dealt with them on the basis of a mixture of political expediency and general principles that are often of scant relevance to the situation.

Countries with economic or strategic interests in the big states have, not surprisingly, sought to protect those interests without much attention to the long-term consequences of their policies or the long-term needs of their countries. With the weakening of colonial ties, most recently those of France with its former colonies, and the end of the Cold War, expediency is now directed less at safeguarding interests than at avoiding the pressure to become involved directly in stabilizing troubled countries.

The principles have not changed. The first is that African boundaries cannot be changed. This principle, which is also enshrined in the charter of the Organization of African Unity and its successor the African Union, looks increasingly today as the legacy of a bygone era. It was plausible in the immediate aftermath of decolonization, when new countries did not want to open themselves to one another's territorial revendications. It was also in keeping with the historically unprecedented worldwide freezing of international borders that characterized the Cold War period. Since the late 1980s, however, more than twenty new states have formed, primarily in the Balkans and the former Soviet Union, but including one in Africa, Eritrea. Yet the international community remains theoretically committed to the territorial integrity of all African states.

The second principle is that the most effective political systems are decentralized, and in the big states, decentralization becomes federalism. Federalism is usually taken to mean a territorial arrangement, not one based on ethnic identities. The Ethiopian solution has been

grudgingly accepted by the international community, but without enthusiasm. It is certainly not held up as a model on how to solve the problem of large, diverse states.

The third principle, which has only prevailed since the end of the Cold War, is that democracy and a strong bill of rights provide the solution to internal conflicts in states big and small. Political systems should be blind to ethnicity and religion and should not recognize the rights of groups. The United States is particularly emphatic on this point.

There is nothing wrong with these principles per se, but they bear little relation to reality. Ethnicity and religion are highly politicized in all African states, and even quite democratic, federal states have problems in dealing with their ethnic and religious diversity once it has become politicized. The example of Canada, still struggling to find a solution to the problem of Quebec, is a sobering reminder that democracy and federalism are no panacea. Furthermore, the distance that separates Africa's big states as they are now from the ideal democratic, federal, decentralized state is enormous, and the international community has neither the tools nor the political will to help them across the chasm. The old formulas— territorial integrity, federalism, decentralization, and democracy—thus ring quite hollow.

It is time to consider a different approach to big African states:

- **Limit commitment to territorial integrity to defending states against outside aggression.** The international system needs to protect countries from being attacked, but it should not try to offer a guarantee of survival to countries threatened by internal factions. Rather than declaring commitment to the territorial integrity of a state, the international community should put all political forces in a country on notice that the survival of their state is in their hands.

- **Be clear about what constitutes external aggression.** Iraq's invasion of Kuwait was a clear case of external aggression. When the neighbors of the DRC, including tiny countries that could never attack the Congo giant if it were a functioning state, send troops into a territory nobody controls, the international community needs to worry about state disintegration, not about external aggression.

- **Do not advocate partition as a solution to the problem of big states or try to decide where the lines of partition should be, but accept partition if it happens.** Africa does not need another Berlin conference and more lines drawn on maps. Nor does it need the stubborn international determination to keep states alive that were dysfunctional at independence and are even more so forty years later.

- **Do not advocate federalism as an all-purpose solution.** Federalism may eliminate the demand for partition in some cases, but this will only happen if the component units of the federal system reflect political reality. In the big, troubled African states, federalism will predominantly be based on ethnicity and/or religion. The role of the international community is not to dictate the boundaries of the component units, but to help the participants reach the needed compromises.

- **Do not push democracy as a panacea.** Though a good thing in itself, democracy is not a solution to the problems of big, dysfunctional African states. A democratic process can only take place when there is a functioning state. State building should come first.

- **Develop a model for international peacekeeping in large states.** That such countries cannot be saturated with foreign military personnel does not mean that intervention should be purely symbolic, as it has often been the case. Peace support operations should use decisive military force where necessary, but above all they must

find a balance between rebuilding local armies, providing local security by invigorating police forces, and offering sound, impartial civilian administration.

- **Do not burden the big African states with peacekeeping in smaller countries.** With the exception of South Africa, big states are too dysfunctional to be encouraged to deal with conflicts in their regions. Even South Africa cannot carry too large a burden in this regard. Delegating peacekeeping in West Africa to Nigeria may look like a good way to avoid a major commitment by the United Nations or the major powers, but Nigeria and other big African states will become a force for stability and peace in their regions *only* if they find ways to manage their considerable political and economic problems. They must be encouraged to focus on their domestic problems first.

- **Accept the fact that in twenty years the map of Africa is unlikely to look like that of today and of forty years ago.** ■

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