Africans Do Not Live By Bread Alone: Against Greed, Not Grievance

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"This civil war was not caused by a political vision or for religious reasons or for ethnic reasons. **This was done for pure greed**. This was done to control a commodity, and that commodity was diamonds." (David Craine, Chief Prosecutor, Special Court, PBS interview, 10 January 2003, pbs.org).

"To put it very simply, there are many side issues but the cause of this conflict is diamonds. **Fundamentally the cause of this war was to control a commodity and that was diamonds**." (David Craine, Chief Prosecutor, Special Court, Press Conference, Freetown, 18 March 2003).

Introduction

Scholars, NGO activists, and journalists have fed the official mind and popular imagination with a particular kind of explanation of conflict that privileges the economic. Civil war is about resources: rebels are motivated by greed, not grievance. Rebels mine diamonds to buy arms. Diamonds are the heart of the matter. A robust campaign against "blood diamonds" - diamond coming from conflict areas - is one way of depriving rebels of funds to make war. Devoid of historical context, explanations such as these remain captivating but unhelpful.

I want to suggest that the greed problematic is reductionist partly because it limits our understanding of rebellion as a political project and partly because it fails to explain rebellion in non-resources areas. By reducing everything to greed, by labeling rebellion as a criminal enterprise, the greed problematic jettisons legitimate struggles that are rooted in the desire to right the wrongs of everyday life or yester years. My argument is that ethnic struggles, youth agitation for inclusion, the marginalisation of women, and separatists demand for regional autonomy constitute an integral part of the broad struggle for citizenship in post-colonial Africa. The challenge, in my view, is to understand how the citizenship question poses itself as an ethnic/minority/communal struggle in the erstwhile colonial territories.

In what follows, I first present a case for the specificity of the Sierra Leonean conflict. I then turn to Paul Collier's argument: how it illuminates the Sierra Leone case. I offer an outline for an alternative interpretation centered on grievance and the inauguration of an insurgency discourse anchored on pan-Africanism. I conclude by invoking citizenship as a way of understanding contemporary conflicts in Africa.

The Specificity of the Sierra Leone Conflict: A Conceptual Statement

My first point is conceptual: How do we explain the differences between the wars of the 1990s - Rwanda, Congo, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Guine-Bissau, Cote d'Ivoire - and the wars of liberation against settler minority regimes in Southern Africa? How do we explain the differences between the wars of liberation in Eritrea and Sudan and that of the *sans culottes*[1] in the 1990s? Are there any similarities between what unfolded in Chad in the 1970s - the first casualty to rebel movements in Africa - and what transpired in Uganda in the 1980s - the first example of a rebel movement capturing state power in post-colonial Africa? How do we make sense of the predominance of forced recruitment, press-ganging, kidnapping, widespread looting, rape, excessive drug abuse and unbridled terror in the *sans culottes*' wars of the 1990s? How do we make sense of these happenings that were manifestly absent in the wars of liberation against settler domination in Southern Africa, the Eritrean war of independence, the National Resistance Army (NRA) in Uganda in the 1980s and Sudan before the 1990s?

I want to suggest that the differences between these wars have nothing to do with the availability/non-availability of resources or the opportunity or feasibility of rebellion as a criminal enterprise. These differences, in my view, have to do with the context within which they unfolded. By context I refer to the changing fortunes of the African state: a) from the era of prosperity in the immediate post-independence period right to the mid-1970s; b) the period of acute economic and political crisis in the 1980s and 1990s and right up to the present moment. The former typifies an era of relative prosperity; the latter a period of mass poverty. These differences are fundamental to understand contemporary armed conflicts in Africa. Armed rebellion may appear as a criminal enterprise, and in the case of Sierra Leone did assume some character of criminality. But this has less to do with the insurgency discourse, which Collier dismisses as propaganda, than with the composition of such movements[2].

Let me make a couple of observations on the specificity of the Sierra Leone conflict.

- Sierra Leone is perhaps the only country in Africa where *non-conventional political actors* have staked their claim to political leadership by taking up arms.[3] The leadership in such movements usually come from marginalized members of the power bloc/established political class, as was the case with Charles Taylor in Liberia, Asumana Mane in Guine-Bissau and Alhassan Ouatara in Cote d'Ivoire. This is significant for it helps explain why the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) was the way it was, why the movement was silent for the first four years of the war, and why it doggedly held on to its belief that power was only attainable through military means.
- It is the first example of a *marginalized social group*, in this case youths, appropriating the language of revolution from radical college students to contest political power.
- Subaltern officers, young men in their 20s, seized power a year after war commenced and proclaimed a revolution.
- Throughout the war no member of the established political class in Sierra Leone or the Diaspora lent any covert or overt support to the movement in furtherance of its political/economic objectives.
- After six years of war something unprecedented happened: 95% of the Sierra Leone military joined the rebellion.
- The RUF was composed of *young men in their 20s and 30s*. Sam Bockarie the notorious field commander was twenty-eight when he became a combatant; Issa Sesay who succeeded him was a teenager when he enlisted in the RUF.
- This was perhaps the only war in Africa without an ethnic factor.

Below is a periodisation to guide our understanding of the trajectory of the war in Sierra Leone:

Phase One: Conventional Warfare, 1991-1993

Phase Two: Guerilla Warfare, 1993-1997

Phase Three: Reign of Terror and Criminality, 1997-2000

Africans Do Not live By Bread Alone: The Economic Argument

The underlying assumption in all of Collier's work can be summarized as simply one of greed/economic calculation.[4] Rebels are motivated by the desire to profit from chaos; such calculations are supposedly propelled by the degree to which such a criminal enterprise can become a viable economic project. How to raise revenue to support such a project might begin to explain why rebels without a cause have a better chance of succeeding in the third world than in the first world. Viability is therefore key to the understanding the dynamics of rebel movements. The rebel movement needs source of support, finance to be precise, for the project to stay alive. "It is this, rather than any objective grounds for grievance which determine whether a country will experience civil war". Violence, predatory behavior, and other anti-social acts "may not be the objective of the rebel organization, but it is the means of financing the conflict". Rebellion is therefore economic power by all means necessary!

Extreme dependence on primary commodity exports, low average income and slow economic growth are the conditions under which such predatory rebellions are likely to occur. Primary commodity exports, particularly diamonds, are prime candidates because they are the "most looted of all economic activities". Diamonds are easy to conceal; they are an economic asset coveted by government and rebels alike. A rebel movement in a diamond-producing country would obviously concentrate on controlling the source of this important economic asset if only because it is central to its survival and continued reproduction. Revenue from diamonds is important to both the government and the rebels: predatory war therefore becomes one of control over key resources in a country. "High primary commodity exports, low income and slow growth are a cocktail which makes predatory rebellions more financially viable".

The above is admittedly a crisp summary of Collier's argument as it relates to Sierra Leone.[5] His approach, in my view, constitutes an exercise in writing outside history; it is as if only rational calculations for profit matters. Yet there is much more to human action/ interaction than simple calculation for profit motive; humans/Africans do not live by bread alone!

Is it the case that the RUF - leadership and rank and file - knew a priori that rebellion was a profitable project? Were they aware of the viability or feasibility of such a project? Did the RUF, as a rebel movement, conceive of resources, *ab initio*, as central to their survival and continued reproduction? These are difficult questions to tackle from the perspective of greed precisely because those who inaugurated or participated in the RUF project were NEVER involved in the insurgency dialogue that preceded armed conflict. The primary agents in that dialogue were college students; the combatants in the RUF project were predominantly marginal youths from urban and rural Sierra Leone - in short, the lumpenproletariat! The disjuncture between insurgency dialogue and predatory rebellion poses troubling questions for any explanation that hinges on greed as the primary cause of armed conflict in Sierra Leone.

Even if we accept, for argument' sake, that the revolutionary project of the college students was hijacked by the predominantly lumpen combatants, we still have to flesh out and explain the extent to which those who were "recruited" were "conscientized", to use a tired "revolutionary" formulation, about the economic motive of the rebellion and its feasibility as well as how it was bound to succeed. Indeed, we will be on shaky ground considering the fact that the RUF was unpopular and highly dependent on forced recruitment of all sorts to replenish its fighting force.

The question of timing is also crucial in understanding the economic factor in the Sierra Leone conflict. A criminal enterprise solely crafted for economic gain would have had as its prime target the immediate takeover of the diamondiferous areas. This did not happen. And from 1991 to 1993, the RUF was buttoned down in the rural/ agricultural districts of Kailahun and Pujehun in the southeast. They were forced to retreat with heavy loses when they attempted to take the rich diamond fields in Kono in late 1991. It would take them another four years before they would retake Kono and hold it for any considerable length of time to allow them to exploit the resources in the area. And this happened only in collaboration with the Sierra Leone military. My point here is that the economic factor was not salient during the first phase of the war.

But Collier's main argument is about the economic causes of armed conflict, not about how resources fuelled armed conflict. The latter might be relevant to the Sierra Leone situation particularly during the third phase of the war, that is to say, from 1997-2000, when the RUF became linked to the international criminal syndicate - arms for diamonds - via Monrovia. RUF sources reveal the perennial need for funds to replenish arms supply, feed combatants, purchase medical drugs and other essentials. In June 1996, the RUF leader, Foday Sankoh, wrote to the Libyan Arab Peoples Jamahiriyya representative Mohamed Talibi thanking him for the "half million United States dollars (500,000 USD) which I received through you for the purchase of needed material to pursue the military mission".[6] The RUF even asked for more: "I now need one and half million United States dollars (USD1,500,000) in order to purchase twice the listed materials for effective and smooth operation". In another letter written in December 1996, the RUF leader made a request for two million dollars for the purchase of arms and ammunition. Sankoh was writing after the Abidjan peace accord in November which had given him the "opportunity to transact my business in getting our fighting materials freely and easily". He then informed the Libyan representative that the RUF had started to "organize serious mining operations in precious minerals which I believe will help us to generate the needed foreign exchange for our mission".[7]

Fresh arms and ammunition from Eastern European countries, huge diamond export from Liberia to Antwerp and Tel Aviv, mercenaries from South Africa and Eastern Europe all suggest the new networks that the rebels had established with the help of Charles Taylor in neighboring Liberia and Blaise Campaore in Burkina Faso. Al -Qaeda would enter the picture and follow the RUF to the diamond fields to launder their enormous loot on the eve of 9/11.

These developments unfolded at a time when the rhetoric of liberation had ceased to have any meaning. Even so, the RUF still continued, in collaboration with the renegade Sierra Leone military, to push for political power. In this sense politics can be read as an extension of economics: political power will give them more security (legitimacy?) to continue their predatory regime.

Greed, predatory rebellion and its continued reproduction only became a marked feature of the Sierra Leone conflict in 1996/97. It cannot explain why war broke out in 1991 or why marginal youths were at the center of the drama and its continuation. To understand why war broke out in 1991 we have to go back and look at the grievances.

Bringing Back Grievance

How do we explain the preponderance of marginal and alienated youths as combatants/leaders in the nasty war that ravaged Sierra Leone for a decade? Why did young military officers in their 20s seize political power a year after the war started? What propelled young men, and some women, to organize a political party to contest for power in 2002?

Answers to these questions take us back to what I consider to be the central issue in African conflict: the political question. The history, character and dynamics of armed movements in Africa suggest that they are initially propelled by political considerations. By this I mean the often popular but sometimes not clearly articulated call for inclusivity, openness, and democracy in the determination of how decisions are made and resources allocated. Below is an outline of how this process unfolded:

Agency:

- the invention of youth as a political identity;
- the convergence between the mainstream and the marginal youth;
- youth culture, political repression and globalization;
- the invention of an imagined community of youth with shared interests;
- the inauguration of an insurgency discourse.

The Context:

- dwindling revenue from mining and agriculture;
- structural adjustment policies in the 80s: cutbacks on education, social services, and jobs.
- the establishment of a one-party dictatorship;
- the emergence of college students as an informal/de facto opposition;
- the extreme centralization of resources and the creation of an alternative network;
- large-scale political corruption and mismanagement.

Paul Collier *et al* invoke Marx and Lenin, tongue in cheek, to substantiate their point about the primacy of the economic in explaining armed conflicts. But they should have gone further to elaborate on the subjective factor à la Lenin and Che Guevara. By this I refer to the willingness and the "revolutionary" commitment of a select group of people to start the "revolution". This is a critical factor in insurgency. It was college students who inaugurated the insurgency discourse and spearheaded the call to arms in Sierra Leone. They recruited marginal youths, including the future leader of the RUF, for military training in Tajura, Libya, from 1987 to 1989. The issue of resources was never discussed in student circles nor was the issue of finance or sustenance regarded as a key element in the proposed project. The main emphasis was on commitment and willingness to acquire military training to start a guerrilla war. What propelled college students to assume the role of vanguard à la Lenin has more to do with the objective conditions than with the availability of resources or the feasibility of rebellion as an economic project. The disjuncture between those who took part in the insurgency discourse and those who executed the RUF project poses enormous problems for the greed problematic in understanding the Sierra Leone conflict.

Rethinking Post-colonial Conflicts: The Citizenship Question in Africa

I would like to suggest that ethnicity and the struggle for inclusivity by marginalized social/cultural groups is the form in which the citizenship question poses itself in Africa. The wrangling over political rights and the talk about economic and political marginality in the Sudan, Cote d'Ivoire and the Great Lakes are really about citizenship. The Anyanya rebellion in the 1950s, the conflagration in the Congo in the 1960s, the Nigerian civil war, the Chadian musical chairs in the 1970s were all about citizenship: the right of groups to actively participate in the nation-state project without discrimination. We need to recall that the pogroms directed against the Igbos in Kano City in 1966 were the immediate catalyst for the declaration of the independent state of Biafra. The Igbos were simply told to leave Kano City, where they had lived all their lives, and to return to their "native land". Their sojourn in Kano in the Sabon Gari quarters was a painful reminder that they were indeed non-indigene and could be asked to leave at any time. Twenty-some odd years later, Tutsis who had fought with Museveni in the NRM were asked to leave Uganda, where most of them were born or which they knew as home, for a place called Rwanda that only existed in their imagination. It was a painful reminder of their alien "otherness". Even though continuous residency had granted them some respite during the period of struggle, the new post-1986 parliament would turn down their request for Ugandan citizenship. It is to the struggle for inclusion, for citizenship broadly defined, that we must turn if we want to understand conflict in contemporary Africa and elsewhere.

Notes

1 A French expression, literally meaning those without pants, loosely referring to the appearance of poor people. It captures the ragtag character and bizarre outfit of the armed movements and militia all over the continent.

2 Paul Collier *et al* have made no attempt to examine the dynamics and composition of any rebel movement.

3 This is probably true of the Lord Resistance Army (LRA) in Uganda and possibly of the fighters in Western Sudan.

4 Paul Collier and his collaborators in the World Bank-sponsored research project are notorious for repeating the same argument in different publications with absolutely no new information. Neither Collier nor any of his associates have studied or tried to understand any rebel movement anywhere in the world. See, for instance, Paul Collier and Anke Hoeffler,' Greed and Grievance in Civil War'. World Bank, Policy Research Working Paper 2355 (2001), 32pp.

5 In Collier's "Economic causes of civil conflict and their implications for policy", we learn that "the rebel leader was offered and accepted the vice-presidency of the country.....He had one further demand, which once conceded, produced (temporary) settlement. His demand was to be the Minister of Mining." Sankoh was never offered the vice-presidency or the ministry of mines. He was made Chairman of the Mineral Resources Commission with the protocol status of Vice-President!

6 Revolutionary United Front of Sierra Leone (RUF/SL), From Cpl. Foday S. Sankoh, Leader, RUF/SL to Brother Mohamed Talibi, Libyan Arab Peoples Jamahiriyya, Accra, Ghana, dated 26 June 1996.

7 Revolutionary United Front of Sierra Leone, From Cpl. Foday S. Sankoh, Leader, RUF/SL, Abidjan, La Cote d'Ivoire to Brother Mohamed Talibi, Peoples Bureau of Libyan Arab Peoples Jamahiriya, Accra, Ghana, 4 December, 1996.

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