Africa and the international system

The politics of state survival

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Contents

1 Fragile states and the international system

Introduction

This book attempts to examine the workings of international politics from the viewpoint of a group of states – and in some degree their people – which are at the bottom of any conventional ordering of global power, importance and prestige. International relations has tended, understandably enough, to look at the world from the viewpoint of its most powerful states. It has been developed as a subject of study in the major capitalist states, and has been directed largely towards helping them to manage the demands of an increasingly complex international system – most obviously through the avoidance of war, but also through the management of the global economy and in other ways. Its dominant focus during the era of the Cold War was on the relationship between the superpowers, with a secondary but still important emphasis on relations between other industrial states such as those of Western Europe. Even the study of 'north–south' relations characteristically had a heavy emphasis on *north–south* relations, often within the context of superpower competition, rather than on south–north ones.

Yet most of the world's states – and in the context of this book, notably those of sub-Saharan Africa – are poor, weak and subordinate. Most of the people in them are poorer, weaker and more subordinate still. International politics affects these states and people in ways that often differ appreciably from the ways in which it affects the people and governments of more powerful states. In particular, even though states are central to the understanding of international relations in the 'Third World' as elsewhere, states themselves are often very different kinds of organisation from those that the conventional study of

international relations tends to take for granted. Their interactions, both with their own populations and with other parts of the international system, correspondingly differ as well. And though the international relations of the Third World, Africa included, has attracted an increasing amount of attention, much of this have operated within assumptions about the nature of statehood and the international system which may be seriously misleading. A view of international politics from the bottom up may therefore help, not only to illuminate the impact of the global system on those who are least able to resist it, but to provide a perspective on that system, and hence on the study of international relations as a whole, which may complement and even correct the perspective gained by looking from the top downwards.

This view from below is especially apposite to sub-Saharan Africa – taken here to include all of the African continent and its adjacent islands apart from those states which border the Mediterranean – because its states are not only of very recent origin, and on the whole amongst the poorest in the world, but have also in the great majority of cases been created by international action in the form of European colonialism, and have been left with state frontiers which rarely correspond to pre-colonial social or geographical identities. The first question that needs to be asked is therefore how these states managed to survive – for a period of some thirty-five years, in most cases, after formal independence – within a global order dominated by states which were evidently vastly more powerful than they. This is not only a question about the nature of the international order which, in some measure, 'permitted' their survival, important though that obviously was. It is also a question about what African states – or more precisely, to make a very important distinction, the rulers who acted on their behalf – did in an attempt to help them to survive. The evident weakness of African states did not reduce them to a state of inertia, in which their fate was determined by external powers. On the contrary, it impelled them to take measures designed to ensure survival, or at least to improve their chances of it. This question of what African rulers did in an attempt to survive provides the primary focus for this book.

The issue of survival in turn, however, raises the question of *whose* survival: the state's, or the ruler's? In the great majority of cases, rulers seek to assure their personal survival by seeking the survival and indeed strengthening of their states. They can on the whole best protect their own security by preserving and enhancing the power of the states

which they rule. But though the defence of statehood normally provides an essential element in personal survival strategies, these strategies none the less impose a particular view of statehood, which associates it with the welfare and security of the ruler. Since the security of African rulers was often particularly at risk, they felt the need to make use of their control over states in distinctive ways, the most characteristic of which was the construction of the 'monopoly states' referred to in later chapters. In some cases, and to an increasing extent, it even led to the development of the 'shadow states' discussed in the final chapter, in which rulers used formal statehood merely as a facade, behind which to conduct what became essentially personal survival strategies.

Survival is not, of course, the only goal of rulers, but it is none the less the precondition for pursuing any other goal. The less secure the rulers, the greater the prominence that it is likely to assume. The insecurity of many African rulers meant that for them, in Jackson and Rosberg's phrase, seamanship often mattered more than navigation: staying afloat was more important than going somewhere.[1] Since personal survival, however important it may be for individual politicians, is not normally regarded as a legitimate basis for political action, it is characteristically excluded in the rhetoric of international relations, in favour of goals which provide a more respectable rationale for their activities. In the case of African states, these most commonly consisted in domestic transformation goals, normally expressed in terms of 'development' and 'nationhood', and external transformation goals, normally expressed in terms of the 'liberation' either of African peoples from alien rule, or of African states from the domination of outside powers. This is turn led to a demand for 'unity' among African states and peoples. Studies which take as their starting point the formal goals of politicians therefore pay considerable attention to these essentially rhetorical appeals. Though rhetoric has a very significant role in politics, both domestic and international, as a way of trying to create solidarity and assure legitimacy for those who use it, these appeals are in this book given only subordinate attention, on the ground that they have been more than adequately covered elsewhere, at the expense of more fundamental issues in African international relations which have commonly been neglected. Other goals notably include aspects of the ruler's welfare apart from survival, such as self-enrichment, which in the case of a few African rulers reached manic proportions. These too on occasion affected Africa's international relations.

This view of the international system from the perspective of those who must use foreign policy essentially as a means of trying to assure their own survival raises issues in the study of international relations which may not be so obvious when it is viewed from the perspective of powerful states with reasonably stable domestic political systems. One of these is that the nature and role of the state itself, as the basic organising concept through which an understanding of the international system is conventionally put together, are far more ambivalent than they appear to be, at least, in those parts of the world which have historically given rise to the study of international relations. Alternative conceptions of statehood, and their application to the international politics especially of weak and fragile states, are examined in the next section. To anticipate: the less solid the state, the greater the need to look beyond it for an understanding of how the society that it claims to govern fits into the international system. Though African states and those who run them have assumed a critical importance in the external relations of the continent, they have done so not merely as the building blocks with which any study of the subject must be constructed, but rather as competitors in an often inchoate struggle for external resources. Africans have been deeply affected by the international system in many ways, some of which have been directly mediated by the state whereas others have not. Their varied engagement in activities which extend beyond the frontiers of their states may be said to constitute 'foreign policies' which are in part independent of those of their governments: smuggling, or going abroad for education, or fleeing as a refugee, can in this sense be regarded as foreign policy decisions, which may in turn affect (and sometimes subvert) the foreign policies of governments. Though a full investigation of these numerous linkages would go well beyond the limits of practicality in a book already conceived on an ambitious scale, they none the less need to be borne in mind, and are referred to at points where they have an important bearing on the policies of states. One particular kind of non-state foreign policy, that of guerrilla movements or insurgencies, has, however, been so important in the foreign relations of Africa that it is accorded a chapter of its own.

The foreign relations of Africa have moreover been far from static over the long period since independence which this book attempts to cover. Many of the most important changes during this period took place within African states themselves, especially in the decline of their economies at a time when most of the rest of the world was enjoying

increasing prosperity, and in their failure in many if not most cases to create domestic political institutions that achieved the support of their populations. These failures in turn greatly intensified the problems of personal and state survival, and thus critically affected Africa's relations with the outside world. The outside world was likewise changing, from the relatively stable equilibrium between the great powers in the 1960s, to the stresses in superpower relations of the 'Second Cold War' of the 1970s, which were particularly marked in their effects on the Third World, the evident economic triumph of the capitalist states in the 1980s (with its knock-on effects on Africa in the form of structural adjustment programmes), and the collapse of the Soviet Union and its allies after 1989. The overall effect of these changes, both inside and outside Africa, was to make it increasingly difficult for African rulers to use international support as a means of maintaining both their states and their personal power, in the way that they had been able to do with considerable success during the decade and a half or so after independence.

Any study which seeks to appraise the relations between African states and their external environment must thus go some way beyond the confines of any narrow conception of international relations. The global system is certainly important, though here much must be taken as read. Equally important, and rather more in need of elucidation, is the nature of African states, which defines their approach to their external world. This most basically extends to 'nature' itself, in the form of the environmental base on which African societies are built – and nowhere in the world is the relationship between human beings and their immediate physical endowment more starkly and at times more tragically evident. It likewise includes the social values and identities which that physical endowment helps to define, often over a very long period, and which in turn help to shape the 'governmentalities', or attitudes to politics and authority, which characterise (often in different ways) the rulers and the ruled.[2] The specific mechanisms by which African states were created, and the peculiar emphasis which these placed on their relations with the external world, in both political and economic terms, provide another formative influence. Nor, finally, can Africa's external relations be divorced from post-independence trajectories which were not entirely determined by the pre-colonial and colonial inheritance and the influence of the outside world, but which were also affected by the actions of African rulers and peoples.

Statehood and global politics

However broadly the analysis of Africa's international politics must ultimately be conceived, the division of the world into states not only forms the basis for the conventional study of international relations, but also provides the single most important fact about the actual working of international politics in Africa. For the moment, therefore, states are where we need to start.

The first question that we have to ask is accordingly what 'states' *are*. Only the most innocent questioner, however, will expect this enquiry to lead to any clear and generally agreed answer. Politics is about conflict, and about the ability of people to devise power structures which, on the one hand, may work to the overall benefit or disadvantage of the individuals who are affected by them, but which, on the other hand, will invariably confer considerably greater benefits and costs on some people than on others. Not only is politics itself a contest, but the words and ideas which are used to describe it are contested too. States, as one of the most important constituents of the structure of global power, are themselves unavoidably part of the contested terrain which politics is about.[3] The definition of statehood is in particular contested because it combines (and, to a large extent, confuses) three different attributes which when taken together have the effect of giving some people power over others.

A first way of looking at statehood consists in equating states with governments which exercise claims to sovereign jurisdiction over a particular territory and population. States in this sense are coercive and administrative institutions, and their 'sovereignty' is the asserted right to act as the final arbiter of actions carried out within the territory which they control. In order to achieve sovereignty, the state requires an institutional structure, which in turn is expected to serve a number of functions. It has to identify a person or group of people who are deemed to 'represent' the state at the highest level, in that their actions and statements are deemed to carry the authority of the state as a whole. These people need to control subordinates, who in turn are charged with subsidiary but essential functions, the most important of which is the physical control of the national territory. The government which they form also needs to extract the money and other resources required to run the state, and may carry out a range of further functions, some of which are normally designed to improve the welfare of the state's population, through education, health care and

other services. The state as government on the one hand serves (or at any rate claims to serve) as a mechanism for ensuring the welfare of its inhabitants, most basically through the provision of peace and order; while on the other hand it necessarily exercises power, which in turn implies the inequality of its citizens, and the ability of some of them to gain at the expense of others. The relative balance between the state as provider of welfare, and the state as source of exploitation, not only separates different theoretical conceptions of the state, but also has a powerful impact on its international relations.

A state in this sense may be more or less capable of imposing its control over the people whom it attempts to govern. No state, mercifully, has been able to exercise complete control over all of the population that is subordinated to it, as the failure of would-be 'totalitarian' states has made clear. Some states have none the less proved far more effective at regulating their populations and territories than others. Although African states have sometimes sought to implement ambitious programmes of social transformation, and have even for a while appeared to be successful in doing so, they have generally been amongst the weakest states in the global system, for reasons which will be explored in the next chapter. At times, they have been unable to maintain even the most exiguous control over much of the territory which they have claimed to govern. Only within the last century, after all, has the whole inhabited area of the globe (with a few exceptions, the most important of which is Antarctica) been divided between states, and statehood came later to much of Africa than to any other area of the inhabited world. The question of whether all of the continent and its inhabitants actually belong to states, which once appeared to have been settled beyond plausible dispute by colonial partition and independence, has been reopened by the evident disappearance of states from parts of the continent, and by the emergence in some of these of alternative authorities whose entitlement to statehood was contestable. The questions of whether international relations can exist without states, and if so what form such relations might take, are by no means empty ones, and the answers cannot be imposed from the outset by definitional sleight of hand.

A second way of approaching statehood is through what one may define, following Buzan, as the 'idea of the state'.[4] States in this sense must be 'constructed' in the minds of at least some of those who form them, including minimally those who run them. This construction is in particular required in order to provide the state with legitimacy, or in

other words, with a basis in morality rather than merely force. It most significantly involves an attempt to find some answer to two questions: the first is why the state should exist in the form that it does, which may be defined as territorial legitimacy; the second is why the group of people who rule it should have any right to act on behalf of those who are merely its subjects or citizens, which may correspondingly be defined as governmental legitimacy. These questions are critical, in that they represent the only means by which the state can justify the claims that it makes on the people whom it seeks to control, and the support of other states and people outside it.

What is deemed to count as a satisfactory answer to the problem of legitimacy has varied very considerably over the course of human history, and still varies appreciably from one state to another. It characteristically draws on a complex of factors which help either to identify groups of people with one another, or to separate them from one another, such as language, religion, shared or unshared experiences and similar or different historical mythologies. In terms of the currently dominant value system of Western liberalism, a satisfactory answer to the question of territorial legitimacy requires that the population (or at least the great majority of it) should voluntarily agree to live within the state concerned, an agreement which in turn is ideally achieved through a sense of nationhood which binds members of the population to one another, and to the state to which they all belong; other claims to territorial legitimacy may rest on the asserted right of a state to control all of the territory which it has occupied at some point in the past; on its right to govern the area allocated to it by international agreements; or on revolutionary aspirations to liberation or even salvation.

The corresponding answer to the question of governmental legitimacy in Western liberal thought is that the government should have the right to act on behalf of its citizens, because they have chosen its leaders through some constitutional mechanism on which they are broadly agreed. At other times and in other places, this question has been answered in other ways, as for example through a widely shared belief that those in power derive their authority from God, or the claim that state authority expresses the dictatorship of the proletariat. In many cases, the question has not been satisfactorily answered at all; or else the 'idea of the state' has been shared (or indeed, it might be said, 'owned') by some of its members and not by others; it is then legitimate for those who own it, but not for those who don't. The ideas of the

state espoused by the ruling group in any one state often differ significantly from those held either in other states, or else among other groups within their own state, and these differences account for (or sometimes just symbolise) many of the conflicts that inflame international politics.

The final way of defining a state is, in Northedge's words, as 'a territorial association of people recognized for purposes of law and diplomacy as a legally equal member of the system of states.'[5] Though a state may be able to control its territory, and even to achieve the loyalty of its population, it none the less needs this recognition in order to participate in the international transactions in which, in the modern interdependent world, a very large part of statehood consists. It may also, in practice, be central to the ability of states to control their own territories. The power of rulers derives not only from the material resources and ideological support of their own people, but equally from their ability to draw on the ideological and material resources provided by other states – and also non-states, such as transnational religious organisations or business corporations. The weaker the state, in terms of its size and capabilities, its level of physical control over its people and territory, and its ability or inability to embody an idea of the state shared by its people, the greater the extent to which it will need to call on external recognition and support. In the case of the African states with which we are concerned in this book, this recognition and support were often critical.

In the mythology of statehood, no significant problems arise from these alternative approaches, since states are deemed to satisfy all of them. State authorities exercise effective government over the territories which are ascribed to them. These territories are in turn legitimately governed by them, because their populations recognise their own identity as citizens of the state concerned, and the government of that state as their government. The recognition of their statehood, both internally by their populations and externally by other states, entitles the governments of states to act on behalf of the state in its internal and external transactions. International relations then consists in a dialogue between the governments of states, and through them, between their populations.

This is, however, a picture which derives at least as much from the self-serving claims of those who run states, and the conversion of these claims into a legitimating ideology for the international order of which

as rulers they form part, as from any objective attributes of states themselves. From another perspective, states may be viewed as power structures, imposed on societies and physical endowments which they then seek to control in the interests of those who run them. Sometimes these power structures are relatively effective, and reasonably well integrated with their social and economic base. Sometimes they are merely perched on top of people and territories which they can do little to control, surviving if at all only by desperate efforts. States themselves, moreover, are no more than groupings of human beings, the relations between whom are structured in ways which may vary dramatically from one state to another. The use of a common title, with the ascription to them of a common international status, no more than thinly disguises the differences between them.

In practice, the attributes ascribed to states by the mythology of statehood very often do not actually coincide at all. There are few, perhaps no, states in which they are all realised in their entirety. Even in the United Kingdom, which satisfies the criteria for statehood better than most, there are substantial populations – most obviously in Northern Ireland, but also in Scotland and elsewhere – who do not accept their own membership of the state that claims them; the mechanisms which convert popular support into government power are open to serious question; and there have even been occasions, again most evidently in Northern Ireland, when the writ of the government over its territory did not run. In most states, and notably all of the African states with which this book is concerned, the gap between the myth and the reality of statehood is considerably greater.

In a sense, every failure of states to measure up to the ideal of statehood comes down to a failure in the idea of the state – though at the same time, the manifest impossibility of getting the entire population of virtually any state to share a common view of its identity, territory and constitution is such that this is only to be expected. The criterion that is most frequently not achieved is governmental legitimacy, which confers on the government of a state the moral right to act on behalf of its population. As already noted, this claim may be validated in a number of ways, but is most commonly expressed through election or other forms of consent. In quite a large number of states, as for example most of those ruled by military regimes, the requirement to rule with the consent of the population is formally recognised, but has none the less been discarded by a government which has actually seized power by force, and which claims a

temporary right to rule in the name of some overriding value such as the maintenance of national unity or the extirpation of corruption. Such claims are often entirely bogus. Often, too, claims to rule by democratic principles are invalidated by the fraudulent conduct of elections, or by the imposition of constitutional systems which have little if any popular support. Non-democratic principles of legitimacy are even more open to abuse, and may well be accepted only by those who stand to gain from them. The failure of the principle of governmental legitimacy dissolves the moral relationship that is assumed by the myth of statehood to exist between the population of the state and the people who run it. It means that rulers do not govern on behalf of those people, however much they may claim to do so, but instead govern simply on their own behalf and that of their supporters. When, under such circumstances, one talks about 'the state', one is referring merely to the individuals who own it.

Claims to territorial legitimacy are likewise frequently contested, as for example when a government asserts its right to control part of the territory of the state, despite the absence of willing consent on the part of those who live within it. The immediate break-up of the Soviet Union after the collapse of Communist Party rule demonstrated all too clearly that the claims previously made that the USSR constituted a voluntary association of peoples were false. The unification of Germany likewise indicated that the claims previously made on behalf of the former German Democratic Republic had been equally fictitious. Given that a large number of territorial boundaries, including notably most of those assigned by colonialism to the states of Africa and Asia, were drawn up by means which paid little if any attention to the views of the people who were incorporated within them, it should be no surprise if the boundaries of states, or even their right to exist at all, were not generally accepted. In particular, these origins may well lead to a situation in which one part of the population – distinguished by its numerical strength, strategic location, or adherence to criteria (such as language or religion) in terms of which the idea of the state is implicitly defined – viewed itself as belonging to the state, whereas other sections of the population did not.

A third way in which the mythology of statehood may fail to apply, and one which has become increasingly important in recent years, is that the government of a state may simply be unable to exercise effective control over the territory which is nominally allocated to it. Over and above any fictitious claims to legitimacy which those who

control the state may make on its behalf, their claims even to sovereignty may be equally fraudulent. On some occasions, people – such as the governments in exile of states under wartime enemy occupation – claim to constitute the government of a state, even when none of them is able safely to set foot inside it. More often, governments which control the capital city are unable to extend that control over the whole of the formal national territory, in the face of opposition from warlords, rebels or secessionists, or the collapse of their own administrative apparatus. In extreme cases, states may, as in the former Yugoslavia, split apart into entities which (with a greater or lesser degree of international acceptance) claim separate statehood, or else as in Somalia they may become so fragmented that no government exists at all.

International recognition, finally, characteristically corresponds, not to any consistent set of empirical criteria, but rather to the acceptability of the state concerned to current *international* mythologies of legitimate statehood. Several governments which controlled by far the greater part of their claimed territory, and even some which had plausible claims to the support of most of their populations, have been denied recognition, whereas others which had little or even no such control, and many which had no claim whatever to the support of their populations, have been accorded it without difficulty. The unilateral declaration of independence by white-ruled Rhodesia clearly infringed against the rules of acceptable statehood in post-colonial Africa and was not recognised even by South Africa, while the declaration of independence by Ojukwu's Biafra, which offended the principle of maintaining the territorial integrity of African states, regardless of any demand for 'self-determination', was eventually recognised only by five other states. Conversely, Western Saharan independence was recognised by a majority of African states, even though the main centres of its sparsely inhabited territory were claimed and occupied by Morocco.

These states which fail to meet the formal (or indeed mythical) requirements of statehood are of the greatest importance, both because they illustrate important features of the way in which the international system works, and equally because they affect a substantial number of states. This failure of reality to correspond to some often quite unattainable ideal is no more than the normal condition of humanity, and is not in itself any cause for concern. What matters is what people do when their ideals are not met, and in international politics this has