



Reconceptualizing State Building in Africa(II): The Unbearable Lightness of Governing: Over-Centralized and Decentralized Governance

by Mark Massey, Jr.

The first article in this series, “Begin by Rethinking State Collapse,” argued that traditional theories of state collapse perpetuate errors that hinder our state building missions. Their state-centric dogmas and great power bias distort our understanding of state collapse, oversimplifying it as merely a technical/administrative problem and narrowly locating blame within the country at issue. One should not equate governmental collapse with societal collapse, lest one overlook the “non-state systems” that often emerge to replace the state. But what does this reconsideration of state collapse imply for state building?

Given the numerous cases of weak, failed and collapsed governments in Africa, one must consider that the modern, nation-state model may not fit much of Africa. This does not necessarily conclude that the state must be done away with, but it does mean that statehood must be “refounded” in a more legitimate, stable form that better fits African societies. In this pursuit, I offer a reconceptualization of state building. The traditional top-down, centralized approach is counter-productive. Instead, a bottom-up approach must be fostered, one that incorporates existing traditional and non-state systems through decentralization programs to create more authentic, legitimate African states. State builders perpetrate two fundamental mistakes that impede developing better governments: 1) (re)constructing over-centralized states; and 2) ignoring non-state systems that often de facto supersede state systems. This article focuses on the first mistake, while the third article in this series will focus on the second.

The Perils of Over-Centralization: The Center-Periphery Disconnect

State builders’ first fundamental mistake is persistently recreating center-heavy, top-down state structures, despite the fact that this type of structure contributes to fragility. African philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah remarked that Africa’s first post-independence rulers in the 1960s “inherited the reins of power; few noticed, at first, that they were not attached to a bit.”¹ Unsurprisingly, political scientist James Wunsch continues, “much remains unchanged... regimes show little sign of closer ties to the grassroots... leadership is drawn from the urban, Westernized sectors and administration continues to be a predominantly top-down process that discourages local empowerment, governance or initiative.”²

Wunsch describes the problem through rational choice theory: since government institutions are public goods, people must see them as “reliable and fair mechanisms for protecting their personal integrity and achieving collective goals, or they will ignore, evade or

¹ Appiah (1992), p. 266

² Wunsch (2000), p. 488

suborn them... [they] must therefore be understood to work, and to embody existing normative and historical dimensions.”³

Many African governments fail to do so, creating a serious gap between the center and the periphery that disconnects populations from politics and institutions. But how did this happen? Center-heavy governments were inherited from obtuse, colonial administrative systems whose borders paid little heed to ethnic demographics. Moreover, Africa’s population is sparsely spread out over large tracts of land creating vast “hinterlands” where state authority is difficult to enforce.⁴ Leaders of newly decolonized states had little incentive to devolve the power, resources and wealth concentrated at the center. This concentration further sucked the talented and ambitious into the capitals, while unchecked governments buttressed by Cold War funding mutated into neo-patrimonial/clientele profit systems, leaving moribund and atrophied local governance in its wake. “The slow, bottom-up process by which a true public constitution is built,” observes Wunsch, “has never been allowed to develop.”⁵ Central governments neglecting and/or exploiting rural and periphery areas are key reasons these areas become hotbeds of insurgency, instability and cross-border networks—particularly when lucrative natural resources are involved. The typical response of “stitching together vagabond governments in the capitals... will do little to fix the problem. The problem is usually hundreds of miles away.”⁶

Beyond the *domestic* center-periphery disconnect, states can become more responsive to *international* organizations than their own citizens. International Relations specialist Christopher Bickerton criticizes the assumption that state building efforts need be internationally led. The problem, he opines, is that this separates local politics from institution building: “politics creates institutions, not vice versa.”⁷ Internationalized state building rearranges power relations “between international agencies and state institutions, thus bypassing domestic populations,” which in turn fosters “popular withdrawal and disengagement from politics.”⁸ International organizations set the standards to be met and run the show. This makes governments “less the creations of the people in question, and more products of external interests.”⁹ A Center for Global Development policy paper concludes similarly: “states which can raise a substantial proportion of their revenues from the international community are less accountable to their citizens and under less pressure to maintain popular legitimacy. They are therefore less likely to have the incentives to cultivate and invest in effective public institutions.”¹⁰

Increasingly detached from and ignored/exploited by “their” modern states, it is not surprising that so many Africans choose to opt out of the state system and its unbearable lightness of governance. What is surprising, however, is that state building responses continue to be top heavy processes that do little to redress the center-periphery disconnect.

The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) is a prime example where the internationally guided transitional process prescribes the typical state building ailments that rhetorically spout decentralization but actually retain center-heaviness, thus “inviting a repetition of the

³ Ibid., p. 487

⁴ Hentz (2004), p. 145; Clapham (1996)

⁵ Wunsch (2000), p. 491; Reno (1998)

⁶ Hentz (2004), p. 155-6

⁷ Bickerton (2003), p. 102

⁸ Ibid., p. 108

⁹ Ibid., p. 96

¹⁰ Moss, Pettersson & van de Walle (2006), p. 1

monarchical pretensions and corrupt practices of past presidencies.”¹¹ The DRC is as farcical of a “nation-state” as they come. Densely populated pockets of distinct linguistic and cultural groups separated by hundreds of miles of hinterland (dis)connected through minimal (or no) infrastructure, interact little or not at all with an “official” government that often has no presence in these locales. Natural resources further complicate and fuel a civil war proving to be one of the world’s most catastrophic humanitarian disasters. Many population groups within the DRC identify more with neighbors across national borders than within.

While the DRC’s “ratified” and internationally crafted constitution devolves some administrative power to regional governments, it preserves the supremacy of a heavy handed executive, which with the more-than-likely persistence of fractured electorates and fragile political parties will give warring factions little stake in the new system and do little to overcome the divisive, zero-sum game of DRC politics.¹² Moreover, international donors do not put their money where their mouth is. The large brunt of their financial aid aims to better governance through central government support but neglects local institution building. Of the \$1.4 billion the World Bank (the DRC’s largest donor) has allocated to the country, only \$15 million goes to institution strengthening (most of which will no doubt go to the center), while USAID has allocated only \$500,000 of its \$71 million for decentralization and local governance.¹³

Marina Ottaway at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace distinguishes between internal and external reconstruction efforts.¹⁴ The former rely on re-establishing power before creating institutions, but usually result in creating undemocratic, predatory institutions. The latter rely on building institutions regardless of the existing, de facto power structures, so often prove rootless, unsustainable and incapable of asserting authority against competing powers. Thus the first challenge is not so much constructing institutions, but creating mechanisms for generating power and authority.¹⁵ A bottom-up incorporation of local, organic power structures can compliment a top-down, centralized approach to help strengthen such mechanisms.

The Merits of Decentralization: Spread the Governance

Decentralization is described as “a state strategy to restructure the center-periphery, or central-local, relations... defined as the transfer of tasks and public authority from the national level to any public agency at the sub-national level.”¹⁶ The literature on decentralization is ambivalent. Theoretically virulent, its track record is mixed. Here are its hailers, who espouse its following (abridged) merits:¹⁷

- 1) it improves efficiency, good governance, equity, service delivery and popular participation;
- 2) it heralds inclusivity of minorities by strengthening local/regional authority;
- 3) it facilitates trust within and between ethnic/regional groups;

¹¹ Kaplan (2007), p. 304

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., p. 304-5

¹⁴ Ottaway (2002)

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Braathen & Hellevik (2006), p. 6

¹⁷ As summarized in Schou & Haug (2005) and Braathen & Hellevik (2006).

- 4) it dampens secessionist urges by providing more autonomy;
- 5) it centrifugally dissipates the conflux of conflict to regional/local levels, thus taking pressure off of the centre;
- 6) it helps cohesively integrate national identity, deepening democracy by attaching populations to local and in turn central government institutions, which in turn legitimizes the state;
- 7) it encourages more equitable resource distribution; and
- 8) it can paradoxically have a centralizing impact in so far as it establishes state presence and authority in the politics of remote/periphery areas.

Yet one also hears the cautionary whispers of its critics, sounding more discordant notes of conflict exacerbation:¹⁸

- 1) it reinforces ethnic identities;
- 2) it encourages and provides resources for secessionism;
- 3) it produces legislation discriminating against ethnic or religious groups;
- 4) it increases conflict between local and central leaders over power-sharing as well as between regions (especially between resource scarce v. resource rich regions, the latter often seeking secession); and
- 5) it assumes that local leaders desire to resolve the conflict, when this is not necessarily true.

The ambivalent decentralization literature warrants two criticisms. First, an imminent critique: their methodology is confused. They tend to choose case studies based on the “dependent variable” (i.e. choosing the cases that support their particular stance)¹⁹ and they fail to adequately account for contextual factors (i.e. differentiating between democratic and authoritarian regimes or the role of natural resources). There are no agreed-upon criteria as to what constitutes success. Thus, many cases, such as Nigeria, are harked simultaneously as both successes²⁰ and failures.²¹

Second, a critical reflection: they miss the point. The decentralization programs tend to reach out to impose the state system upon the locale rather than organically incorporate the locale’s system into the state. The analyses thus evaluate how well the center connects to the locales, rather than asking what they are actually connecting to. To this extent, a decentralization program may be deemed a *technical/administrative* success if it devolves adequate authority to local governments. But if these local governments are mere extensions of a dubious state and if they do not integrate local cultural, normative and historical dynamics, the *quality* of decentralization is still questionable and populations may continue to evade them. The root of the problem is still neglected. Moreover, high transaction costs and corrupt temptations undermine decentralization programs stemming from the center.²² These programs are typically meaningless

¹⁸ As summarised in Schou & Haug (2005) and Braathen & Hellevik (2006).

¹⁹ Brancati (2006), p. 653

²⁰ Suberu (2004)

²¹ Brancati (2006), p. 652

²² Wunsch (2000), p. 496

reforms that merely deconcentrate administrative structures.²³ But decentralization programs can help redress these problems and mitigate conflict if properly designed and implemented.

Center-focused reform is inadequate. It merely recreates the very systems that failed in the first place; it is akin to building castles on sand. Likewise, most decentralization plans merely trickle down watered-down central authority. Instead, state building efforts must foster, as Africa expert Joshua Forrest opines, “a more dispersed system of locally idiosyncratic political rule... [in which] center-periphery political relations... reflect a cooperative, bargaining-oriented sharing of decentralized political authority, rather than a struggle for control over regional authority and resources.”²⁴ Local governance should be legally and institutionally strengthened and the system must adopt the subsidiary principle “that all government functions should be performed at the most local feasible level.”²⁵ The center must play a vital role as well, but in a different way. Its focus is “not to establish a polity, but to help perfect it” by guaranteeing peace and rule of law; facilitating relations among the formal/informal, national/local institutions; integrating them within a broader state structure that provides the services the local institutions cannot; and elaborating this larger state structure.²⁶ “If they cannot even do that,” Wunsch remarks, “then it is well past time for them simply to dissolve and end this surreal fiction.”²⁷ Central and local governments are partners, not competitors. Conceiving and implementing proper decentralization reforms will help make this reality. Contrary to common assertions, substantial decentralization can counteract secessionist urges by providing more autonomy (incentive for secessionist leaders) which in turn maintains state cohesion (incentive for central leaders).

Conclusion

Unfortunately, leaders in the capital are reluctant to surrender wealth and power. As African political scientist Claude Ake describes, “In most of Africa, the state is a contested terrain where different nationalities, sub-nationalities, ‘ethnic groups’ and communities go to fight for the appropriation of resources including power. A state which is a contested terrain in this sense can only be an anarchy of self-seeking and a theater of war.”²⁸ Donors may likewise be hesitant. Unfamiliar with systems that exist in the “chaos” beyond the (often equally “chaotic”) capital, they often presume that these systems either do not exist or are undemocratic, corrupt and predatory. They are unsure *what* to build up, let alone *how*.

Two responses. First, donors and central leaders must get over their anxiety against local governance. “Is it not strikingly odd,” one expert asks, “that international advocates of ‘democracy’ seem at times so to distrust capacity for, and dislike the products of, local social self-organization?”²⁹ The successful aid project in Jurm, Afghanistan provides a good development model to replicate. The central government barely exists in Jurm. But, journalist Sabrina Tavernise explains, “The idea to change that was simple: people elected the most trusted villagers, and the government in Kabul, helped by foreign donors, gave them direct grants—

²³ Forrest (2007), p. 235

²⁴ Ibid., p. 235

²⁵ Wunsch (2007), p. 497

²⁶ Ibid., p. 505

²⁷ Ibid., p. 499

²⁸ Ake (2003), p. 167

²⁹ Richards (2005), p. 19

money to build things... for themselves.”³⁰ Though these projects should be limited in size, scope and technical capacity, demand the unanimous consent and participation of locals, and take longer to implement, they nonetheless “work because they take development down to its most basic level, with villagers directing the spending to improve their own lives, cutting out middle men, local and foreign, as well as much of the overhead costs and corruption.”³¹ Foreign and domestic aid programs should encourage this model where possible. It will not always be applicable, and donors are correct to insist on transparency and worry about corruption. But these concerns are as prevalent in capital governments as local ones, if not more so. As one farmer in Jurm assessed, “You don’t steal from yourself.”³²

Second, research indicates that unofficial systems exist throughout Africa with the potential to provide a legitimate, solid foundation for building local governance. Many traditional, pre-colonial systems of governance have persisted (particularly in remote, periphery areas) even if they were officially ignored in the rise and fall of modern states (perhaps *because* they were ignored). Many others evolve in the wake of collapse. This brings us to the second fundamental mistake: state builders ignore the very systems that millions of Africans choose over the state. In so doing, they overlook what could prove to be building blocks for the future order. In essence, they miss the trees for the forest. They must look below the state (to the informal, non-state systems that function before/during/after the state’s reign) as well as beyond the state’s collapse (to those that organically evolve in its wake). The third article in this series will look at this issue, highlighting Northern Somalia (Somaliland) as a case study. It will examine the potential for—as well as dangers of—incorporating such non-state systems from the bottom-up to complement the top-down, internationally-led programs. This ultimately puts the reigns back in Africans’ hands.

Mark Massey, Jr. works for The Louis Berger Group, Inc., an engineering and economic development firm focusing on stabilization and reconstruction programs in conflict countries. He holds an MA in International Conflict Studies from the University of London’s King’s College and a BA in Political Science and History from McGill University.

This article is published in [Small Wars Journal](#).

© 2011, Small Wars Foundation.

Permission is granted to print single copies for personal, non-commercial use. Select non-commercial use is licensed via a Creative Commons BY-NC-SA 3.0 license per our [Terms of Use](#).

No FACTUAL STATEMENT should be relied upon without further investigation on your part sufficient to satisfy you in your independent judgment that it is true.

Please consider [supporting Small Wars Journal](#).



³⁰ Tavernise, Sabrina, “Afghan Enclave Seen as Model for Development,” The New York Times, 13 November, 2009

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.