



Reconceptualizing State Building In Africa (IV): Lessons for State Building

by Mark Massey Jr.

*...And the riot squad they're restless, they need somewhere to go, as lady and I look out tonight
from desolation row.*
- Bob Dylan, *Desolation Row*, 1965

This series^{1,2,3} has argued for a reconceptualization of state building. It started by offering a new way of understanding state collapse that recognizes processes of transformation and emerging orders that are often mistaken for anarchy. Building on this, it criticized the standard state building model for being over-centralized and encouraged meaningful decentralization. It sought to make a new contribution to this discipline by highlighting the potentials that non-state systems hold for building more stable, democratic states in Africa, looking at Somaliland as a case study.

This final article addresses the lessons and implications for state building. It argues not only *why*, but *how* to implement these lessons by positing methods and mechanisms for incorporating these systems into the government and fusing local, bottom-up efforts with international, top-down efforts.

Lessons and Implications

What lessons do these experiences hold? For one, they directly undermine the assumption equating state and societal collapse. They prove varying systems of order can emerge and highlight the absurdity of ignoring these orders. The stark contrast between northern Somalia's "governance without government" and southern Somalia's "government without governance" makes this point. Officials in Mogadishu continue to build government institutions disconnected from society and reality. As one reporter observes of the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) in Mogadishu:

...the violence will continue and probably intensify unless the government reconciles with clan elders, who control as much as anyone controls, what happens in Somalia... So far, there's been very little of that. Instead of reaching out to truly influential figures, analysts say the government has picked ministers not because they have any substantial support among their clans but because they will do the government's bidding. The result is an increasingly isolated, authoritarian and unpopular government in which the transitional president, Abdillahi Yusuf Ahmed,

¹ Essay One, <http://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/2011/01/reconceptualizing-state-build/>

² Essay Two, <http://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/2011/01/reconceptualizing-state-build2/>

³ Essay Three, <http://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/2011/01/reconceptualizing-state-build3/>

is accused of behaving more like a clan warlord—which he is—than a national leader.⁴

Further indicating its disconnect, the TFG allowed for “two phenomena hitherto believed by almost all Somalis to be so obscene that they took for granted that they would never occur”: the invitation for Ethiopian troops to occupy Mogadishu and the segregation of Islamic thought from politics.⁵ Granted, Ethiopian and US security interests propelled these phenomena. But this precisely underlines the point that internationalized state building is often plagued by contradicting international and internal interests that produce states more responsive to international wishes than internal needs.

Somaliland thus questions the hitherto assumed necessity of internationally-led, top-down state building. International neglect has been a blessing in disguise freeing northern Somalis to craft their own socially rooted and responsive institutions. Rather than passively falling victim to warlord predation, the populations pro-actively fused indigenous, non-state organizations with democratic institutions, producing decentralized political institutions more representative and popularly legitimate than any previous Somali government.⁶ In some ways, though, international non-recognition hinders further development because it disqualifies Somaliland from receiving bilateral and international financial aid, discourages foreign investment, constricts trade and disconnects it from participation in international politics.⁷ If Somaliland is ignored for too long by the international community, its impressive governance may wither into something less savory. This would be a drastic missed opportunity.

At the same time, the very success of extra-state governance creates predicaments for state builders because it reduces incentives and need for a state apparatus. If these systems are working better than previous governments, why return to the past? Here it is vital to comprehend the intense distrust, even animosity, many Somalis harbor against their previous governments—not surprising given the brutally oppressive, authoritarian history of the Somali state. Moreover, the post-collapse governments have not been reassuring. The failed Transitional National Government (TNG) of 2000-2003 showed signs of replicating the state-as-oppressive-tool, with indications that many of its leaders intended to create a “paper state” that would funnel foreign aid and protect their economic and political interests.⁸ Because Somalis view the state as a zero-sum political game for power and wealth, state building is inevitably a “conflict-producing exercise” that may counteract peace building in the short term.⁹ Indeed, many of the key actors upholding Somalia’s governance without government seem to represent a new group of “spoilers” who promote the peace of non-state governance precisely because they fear the restoration of a repressive state.¹⁰

One sees a similar predicament in Puntland in northeastern Somalia. Non-state civil society groups provide basic social services while the oppressive clan dictatorship and warlords control the political structure. But these separate trajectories are bound to collide. As one Somali expert explains, the better civil society groups get at delivering social services, the more the

4 Gettleman, Jeffrey, “The New Somalia: A Grimly Familiar Rerun of Chaos,” *The New York Times*, 21 February 2007

5 Samatar (2007)

6 Bradbury, Abokor & Yusuf (2003), p. 475

7 *Ibid.*, p. 458

8 Le Sage (2002)

9 Menkhaus (2006/07), p. 77

10 *Ibid.*, p. 95-6; Helander (2005), pp. 201-2

oppressive political structure fears and seeks to co-opt them. The international community must recognize the “delicacy of the balancing act it must perform”: the “built-in bias” it has “to work with state-like mechanisms... may mean unwittingly strengthening self-appointed and violent gate-keepers at the expense of civil society.”¹¹

In this regard, one Somali aptly compares the relationship between Somali civil society and the state to the porcupine dilemma.¹² Like two porcupines in the cold, they need to get close to each other to generate body heat. But the closer they get, the deeper their quills stab each other, yet the farther away they get, the more cold overtakes them.

This suggests that a revived state may have to be what political scientist Ken Menkhaus terms a “mediated state” in which central government reconstruction is “harmonized or nested together” with organic, non-state complexes “in a negotiated division of labor.”¹³ Indeed, state builders may have no choice. In Somalia’s case, the country has an extremely meager base for tax revenues, meaning the central government will have to be minimalist in scope, limited to performing only the most basic governmental functions, leaving local governments and private and non-profit actors to fill the void.¹⁴ Yet the TFG “remains wedded to an old, maximalist view of the state that is utterly out of synch with Somalia’s fiscal realities,” as is indicated by its bloated cabinet “including, of all things, a minister of tourism.”¹⁵ Here one recalls critiques of the typical state building model’s absurdly complex and unrealistic prescriptions, given post-conflict governments’ meager capacities.¹⁶ Some observe similar errors in the Democratic Republic of Congo’s (DRC) reconstruction.¹⁷

A decentralized, minimalist state will likely prove necessary. This reduces the opportunity and capability of central leaders to reproduce the swollen patrimonial regimes of the past. Effective decentralization dissolves the concentration of conflict from the center and transforms the zero-sum nature of state control. The mediated state does not have to be permanent. It can be a “lengthy transition strategy,” a medium-term solution that reconnects the state to the reality of society.¹⁸

In reality, collapsed states may have no choice but to mediate their way back into authority with these non-state complexes. State officials in the DRC are forced to do this with the violent economic networks there.¹⁹ But one also sees state mediation effectively used in more stable, functioning African states. For example, deadly, disordered conflict erupted in relatively lawless periphery areas of Kenya that fed a rise in terrorist activity and a decline in tourism. The Kenyan government, which holds minimal de facto authority in these regions, innovatively responded by essentially subcontracting security and law enforcement functions out to “peace and development committees” (PDCs) formed by local, non-state authorities (tribal leaders, civic groups, local NGOs, etc.) that restored peace, law and order.²⁰

11 Helander (2005), pp. 201-2

12 Samatar (2007)

13 Menkhaus (2006/07), p. 103

14 Ibid., p. 94-5

15 Ibid., p. 95

16 Ottaway (2002)

17 Kaplan (2007)

18 Menkhaus (2006/07), p. 103

19 Raeymaekers (2007)

20 Menkhaus (2005)

If state builders are to incorporate these non-state complexes as building blocks towards refounded, stable statehoods, they must remain aware of such predicaments and understand the internal dynamics of these societal responses to state failure/collapse. The argument here is not naïve enough to suppose every organic, socially rooted complex will progress towards legitimate, representative governance. As much potential as many complexes have towards such ends, many simultaneously harbor seeds of oppressive violence. But the above cases highlight their untapped potential. Analysis that differentiates between and within these complexes is vital to ensure cultivation of their positive rather than negative attributes. This requires understanding the evolving interests and risk management strategies of local actors.

International and domestic state builders can contribute to this endeavor in many ways. They should hire anthropologists to investigate the micro-level structures of neglected and peripheral areas of fragile/collapsed states. This is similar to the military's Human Terrain System and Major Jim Gant's "One Tribe at a Time" Counter Insurgency approach in Afghanistan,²¹ but applied to state building. It would produce better understandings of the micro-level power arrangements, which would in turn facilitate the central-periphery bargaining process and improve the design of effective decentralization programs.²² Community representatives and indigenous leaders must play active roles in restructuring and incorporating local governance. For example, efforts should include tribal leaders, schoolteachers, peasant organization representatives (for their key economic roles), religious leaders (for their conflict resolution roles) and respected elderly women and men from the various constituencies.²³ Of course, it is often difficult to distinguish what is legitimate from what is illegitimate, but this is precisely where anthropological studies can help identify the stable, authentic aspects from the problematic ones.

Donors and NGOs should help mobilize support and resources to empower local governments vis-à-vis the center so as to create a more balanced, representative government. Effectively doing so would help kick into effect the conflict mitigating potentials of decentralization. Granted, many domestic and international state builders may oppose such incorporation. Domestic leaders in the capital will often try to block any dispersion of their power. This is why the international community needs to devise mechanisms and programs that do not depend on central governments but can work with emerging orders to cultivate good governance and development. Aid can be a useful incentive. Donors and NGOs could use aid conditionality to monitor corruption, pressure central governments to facilitate meaningful decentralization and reward better governed local administrations with more investment, creating competitive incentives for local administrations to model their successful counterparts.²⁴ However, they must be cautious that aid conditionality does not make local governments more responsive to donors than their constituent populations, thus undermining the very point of their inclusion. This is a fine balancing act. Ultimately, aid programs must help wean governments off aid dependency to foster long-term sustainability, even if this entails short-term deficiencies.²⁵ They should also push international laws and norms that allow international institutions to

21 Gant (2009)

22 Forrest (2007), p. 237

23 Ibid., pp. 237-8

24 Boyce (2002); Forrest (2007), p. 236

25 Fukuyama (2004); Kaplan (2007), p. 310-1

recognize and interact with these de facto systems that fill the void left by failed/collapsed states.²⁶ This could make them more accountable for upholding/violating human rights.

However, the international community may oppose incorporating these non-state orders. It assumes that such orders are temporary, criminal deviances and is fearful because they do not resemble the empirical and philosophical models of Western states. But if legitimate African statehoods are to emerge from collapse, the international community must accept that they may not exactly replicate the idealized Western image or philosophies. To expect them to do so is not only condescending and naïve, but “one more generation of the ‘conquest state,’ though now with domestic rulers.”²⁷ Stability and legitimacy relies on populations being able to craft their own institutions through their own learning processes. International organizations can helpfully engage in such processes, but all too often they prove overbearing and counterproductive, short cutting and hijacking the learning process.

In a twist of history, Africans are redrawing the map of Africa, paying little heed to the colonially inherited borders. Different groups in society (tribal structures, ethnic and religious groups, conflict trade networks, guerrilla movements and other non-state systems) hold different forms of authority/power with fragmented and overlapping forms of sovereignty. State builders must try to map this. Tracing how they interact and exercise this power outlines this complex map. These new de facto borders do not match de jure ones. They may look much different from traditional maps, but they would reflect a reality that we currently overlook. This is not to say that states must redraw borders according to these emerging trends, but it is to say we must better understand them.

State builders should also flexibly adapt to changing notions of sovereignty. The international community has already begun to rethink sovereignty legally (human rights regimes), militarily (Responsibility to Protect) and economically/politically (European Union). State building should likewise be open to innovative, dynamic reformulations. This could help address the *regional* causes of state collapse. Decentralization and regionalization can be mutually supportive, providing stability and integration from below and above the state: decentralization develops states legitimate and stable enough to move towards regionalized, African unions, while regionalized efforts help stabilize and pacify states. Giving up some sovereignty can paradoxically strengthen a state, especially when it produces economic prosperity. For example, there is potential to transform regional trade networks exploiting natural resource wars into legal networks that spur sustainable growth.²⁸ Decentralized statehoods of regionally interconnected (possibly overlapping) sovereignty may prove for a more stable African state system.

Conclusion

The hope of this series has been to provide a strategic reconceptualization of both state collapse and state building that attempts to transcend the typical technical and state-centric analysis by putting collapse and formation back into their social/cultural/historical contexts. In so doing, it hopes to open up methods that will help put state reconstruction back into the hands of the indigenous populations. By breaking down strictly delineated boundaries between

26 Hagmann & Hoehne (2007), p. 26; for a legal discussion concerning Somaliland, see Schoiswohl (2004).

27 Wunsch (2000), p. 504

28 Binns and Maconachie (2007) make this case for Sierra Leone's diamonds.

collapse/formation, war/peace, internal/external, traditional/modern and society/state, it has sought to reveal the amorphous realities that interweave these theoretically distinct entities.

These conclusions are not meant to paint a rosy portrait of a teeming underworld of democratic panaceas across Africa waiting to spring forth. The crooked timber of humanity runs through them all, leaving many plump with the seeds of violence and subjugation. However, this series does mean to open new perspectives that likewise reveal that many of these non-state complexes are fertile grounds for rejuvenating legitimate, stable and representative governments. State builders must throw off their teleological blinders if they are to tap the potential of these complexes. In so doing, they can better understand the internal dynamics behind, below and beyond state collapse and state formation.

The main argument is for state builders to craft nuanced approaches that fuse internationally assisted, top-down methods with organic, bottom-up reconstruction. While the findings question the assumed necessity of internationally guided state building, they do not deem such assistance futile. The international community must learn how to foster state building without being too overbearing and hijacking it from the hands of the indigenous populations. In so doing, international and domestic state builders can contribute to refounding states that better “fit” African societies.

If state builders cannot do this, their products will likely mirror Bob Dylan’s description of desolation row: an administrative circus with blind commissioners walking a thin tight-rope of stability, hands in their pockets, perched above a town overrun by foreign sailors, entrepreneurs profiting from hangings and restless riot squads with nowhere to go.

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