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The Crisis Of The State In Africa

by Shaheen Mozaffar

In contemporary Africa, as everywhere in the world today, the state has assumed a central role in a wider range of tasks such as fostering and maintaining economic growth, providing for the welfare of the citizens and ensuring law and order. But since gaining independence in the 1960s, African states have exhibited a steadily diminishing capacity for performing their accustomed functions. This has given rise to the now widely-accepted aphorism that the state in Africa is in crisis. Evidence of this crisis is readily found in several areas.

It is, first of all, found in the lack of sustained economic growth, despite the disproportionately high expenditures undertaken by African states since independence. In 1967, for example, African state expenditures, excluding South Africa, averaged about 15% of the Gross Domestic Product or GDP (the total value of all goods and services produced within the country); by 1982, they had risen to over 30% of GDP. Increased state expenditures produced economic growth only in exceptional cases in the 1970s, for example, in Botswana, Gabon, Ivory Coast, Kenya and Malawi, and actually produced decline in growth overall. However, per capita GDP growth rates across the continent, excluding South Africa, fell from 1.3% in the 1960s to -.4% in 1983.

Second, evidence of state crisis is found in the pervasive corruption and mismanagement among public officials, from the policeman on the beat to the highest levels of the ruling circles. For example, President Mobutu of Zaire has reputedly amassed a personal fortune conservatively estimated to be \$1 billion. The degree of corruption certainly varies within and across countries, but in general, the absence of public morality, or at least the perception of its absence, in the exercise of state power has severely reduced the credibility of the state in the eyes of the citizens. As a consequence, large segments of the populations in many African countries have opted to withdraw from the formal economy regulated by the state, and derive their livelihoods from informal social networks based on personal friendships

and family ties outside state control. According to some estimates, these informal economies account for almost half of all economic activity in many countries. The growing significance of these parallel markets has recently impelled the World Bank to commission several studies on their scope and impact on development policies urged by the Bank on African countries.

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A variety of political, social and economic indicators, thus, clearly attest to the crisis of the state in Africa. What is not so clear, however, is the reason or reasons, why and how such a situation has come to pass. Conventionally, two alternative explanations have been offered. One explanation emphasizes internal factors:

- 1) the incompetence of African leaders and their inadvisable policies,
- 2) the "traditional" African cultural values which allegedly promote "backward" attitudes deemed inappropriate for a modern society, and
- 3) the more objective factors of overpopulation, lack of skilled personnel and scarce natural resources.

The other explanation emphasizes external factors:

- 1) the Western military and economic domination of the contemporary international system,
- 2) the resulting perpetuation of African dependency on Western aid, and
- 3) the attempt by Western countries to advance their "imperialist" interests by supporting corrupt and unpopular governments in Africa.

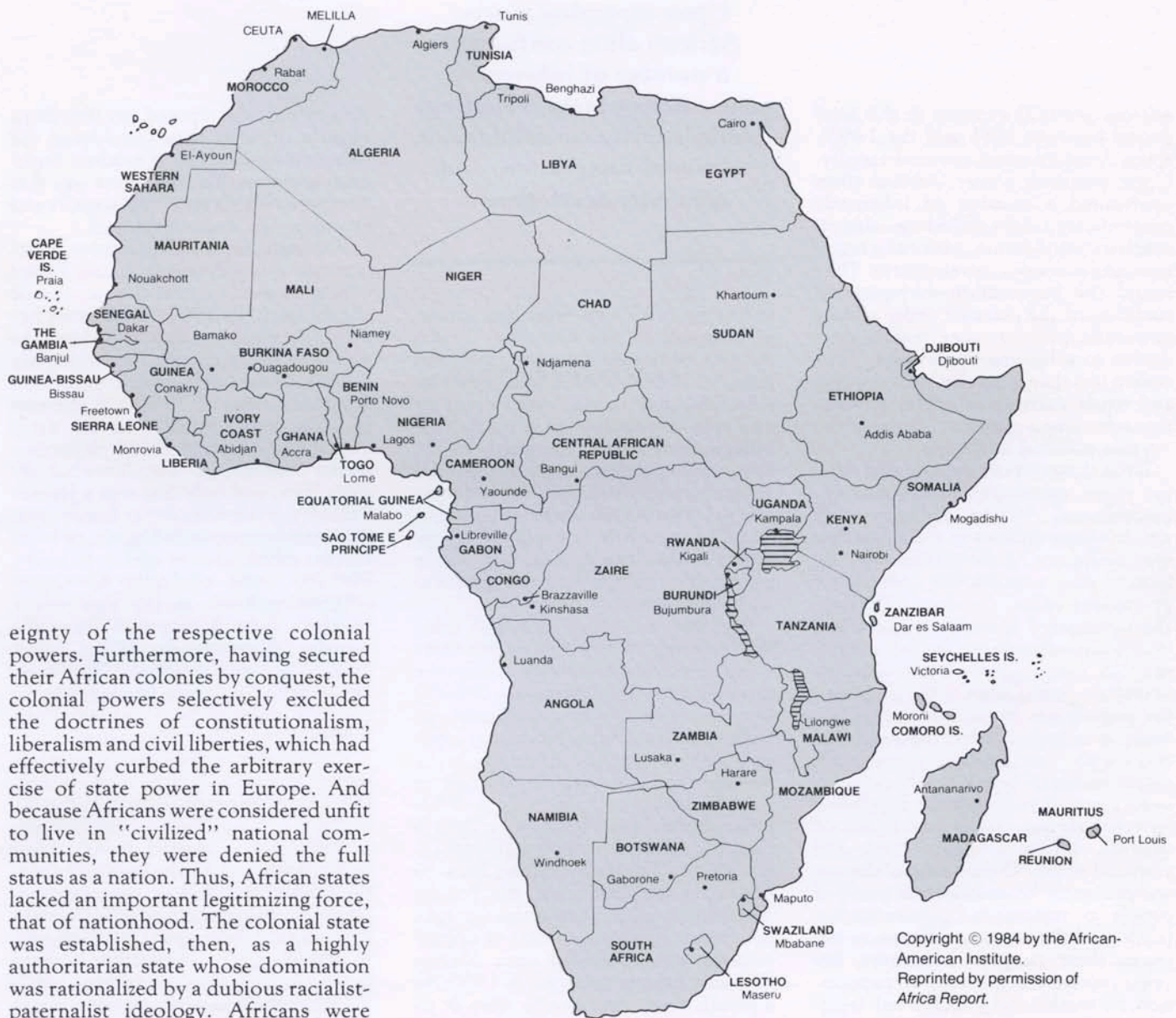
An objective evaluation of the validity of these explanations is complicated by their biases. Each assumes African states and leaders to be second rate. Both explanations, moreover, offer a simplistic one-dimensional view of what is otherwise an inordinately complex situation. Most significantly, both ignore the deeper historical and structural factors which shaped the origin and development of the modern state in Africa, and which continue to influence its performance today.

The Modern State and its Colonial Variant

The modern sovereign state, in concept and organization, originated in medieval Europe with the breakdown of feudalism and the accompanying rise of absolute monarchies. Over the next two centuries, it evolved in close conjunction with the development of modern capitalism. The progressive changes of the European state—from the absolutist—mercantilist state to the liberal—democratic state to the social-welfare state—simultaneously shaped, and were shaped by the wider socioeconomic changes wrought by capitalism—the decline of the aristocracy, the rise of the urban bourgeoisie and the expansion of the industrial working class. Thus, in Europe, the modern state and civil society evolved interdependently, as a result of which the state came to acquire legitimacy in the eyes of the people because its laws and institutions embodied their cultural values and philosophical aspirations.

In Africa, however, the joint historical processes of state formation and capitalist development were disconnected. The modern state was imposed on Africa by colonial powers who sought economic and military gains.

The colonial state, moreover, was imposed on African societies which were predominantly based on small-scale peasant farming. This historical anomaly produced deep-seated contradictions both in the very nature of the state imposed on Africa and in its impact on African societies. The colonial state imposed on Africa in the late-nineteenth century had no independent standing in international law, but derived its legal status from the sover-



eighty of the respective colonial powers. Furthermore, having secured their African colonies by conquest, the colonial powers selectively excluded the doctrines of constitutionalism, liberalism and civil liberties, which had effectively curbed the arbitrary exercise of state power in Europe. And because Africans were considered unfit to live in "civilized" national communities, they were denied the full status as a nation. Thus, African states lacked an important legitimizing force, that of nationhood. The colonial state was established, then, as a highly authoritarian state whose domination was rationalized by a dubious racist-paternalist ideology. Africans were seen by their oppressors as inferiors who needed help. Colonial power was exercised through a coercive bureaucratic apparatus.

The Impact of the Colonial State

The bureaucratic-authoritarian tradition of the colonial state has remained the dominant political tradition in contemporary Africa, despite attempts by European and African leaders to introduce western-style democracy on the continent. After World War II, confronted with a growing African nationalism and a changed international environment in which

colonies fell from favor, the colonial powers hurriedly introduced democratic tradition as the ideal political system, the former because that was the only tradition they knew, and the latter because they saw the democratic ideals of liberty, freedom and equality (many African nationalist leaders quoted Thomas Jefferson in their speeches) as a powerful philosophical weapon to challenge the colonial powers in their own language. However, the potential for the success of the newly introduced democratic institutions was not great. The constitutionally-sanctioned autocratic powers of the colonial state—

legislation by executive decree, executive supremacy, suspension of civil liberties—were retained in the laws and institutions of the post-colonial state in Africa. At independence, therefore, the new African elites inherited a state which embodied two traditions—the colonial bureaucratic-authoritarian tradition and the newer democratic tradition—whose underlying values were profoundly at odds with each other.

After independence, the democratic institutions were discarded by African elites because the underlying liberal values of these institutions did not have sufficient time to take root in

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African political cultures in the brief period between 1945 and the 1960s, when decolonization occurred rapidly. Upon assuming power, African elites confronted a number of inherently contradictory tasks including; administrative consolidation, national integration, and economic development. They found the bureaucratic-authoritarian tradition of the colonial order and its autocratic policies more readily conducive to achieving these tasks. Thus within less than a decade, military rule and single-party or no-party governments became a common feature of the African political landscape.

If the character of post-colonial African states was shaped by colonialism, postcolonial African societies were also artificial entities in the sense that they could not be considered nations. Historically, a nation is a community of people who develop solidarity through shared language, custom and institutions. A state, on the other hand, is a legal institutional system claiming sovereign power over a territory and the population living within it. Over time, as ethnic loyalty (nationalism) fuses with state loyalty (patriotism), nation and state bond. In Africa, however, colonial rule brought together a heterogeneous conglomeration of peoples within a single territorial administration. The drawing of district and provincial boundaries that grouped people by language and culture further reinforced the existing differences between these peoples. Moreover, because economic growth, transportation networks and educational facilities were unevenly distributed within individual colonies, some groups benefited more than others, which only served to accentuate ethnic differences and heighten ethnic consciousness.

These contradictions between state and society were nowhere more evident than in Nigeria, the largest of the British colonies. In Nigeria, the British brought together three major groups, each with a distinct language, religion and form of political organization. In the north, the Hausa-Fulani peoples followed Islam and possessed a highly centralized political system headed by an aristocratic ruler (the *emir*) and supported by an elaborate bureaucracy

and army and a well-organized system of taxation. In the west, the Yoruba peoples possessed a loose confederal political system headed by a symbolic ruler (the *alafin*), who was elected by and was responsible to a council of independent rulers (the *obas*). In the east, the Ibo peoples lived in scattered village communities, each with a decentralized republican form of government in which a council of village elders made decisions for the whole community on the basis of tradition and consensus.

The uneven impact of British colonial policies only served to reinforce these historical differences between the three major ethnic groups in Nigeria. For example, European educational facilities and profitable commercial enterprises were concentrated largely in the western and the eastern regions in Nigeria during colonial rule. And because these two regions also had a longer period of contact with and exposure to Europeans, dating back to the era of the slave trade, the Yoruba and Ibo peoples were quick to take advantage of whatever limited opportunities were provided once Nigeria officially became a colony in 1900. As a result, these two groups were in an advantageous position to take over the reins of government from the British at independence. In the north, however, after the initial Hausa-Fulani opposition to being colonized was crushed by military force, the British officials retained the Hausa-Fulani rulers as subordinate agents through whom colonial rule was enforced. As documented in their diaries and memoirs, many British officials posted in the north as advisers to the Hausa-Fulani rulers saw the Hausa-Fulani aristocracy as embodying the cultures and privileges of their own aristocratic past. And many of them were motivated to preserve these aristocratic traditions by deliberately

preventing the spread to northern Nigeria of what they considered the dehumanizing values of modern European societies. The net effect was that northern Nigeria remained socially and economically underdeveloped.

For example, at independence, there was not a single senior Hausa-Fulani officer in the Nigerian civil service or the military. In 1957, three years before independence, there were less than 4,000 students enrolled in secondary schools in the north, as compared to a combined total of 28,000 in the east and the west. Finally, in the early 1950s, out of a total of 160 physicians in the country, 76 were Yorubas, 49 were Ibos, and only one was a Hausa-Fulani (the rest were either Europeans, Africans from outside Nigeria, or from smaller ethnic groups within Nigeria). Perhaps most critically for post-colonial politics, in the democratic elections held in preparation for the transfer of power, the Hausa-Fulani leaders, as representatives of the single largest ethnic group in Nigeria, won an electoral majority and succeeded the British at the helm of the state.

During the nationalist movements for independence, however, ethnic rivalries were temporarily submerged in the interest of confronting the colonial powers with a united front. After independence, with the moderating influence of the colonial state removed, ethnicity resurged as a political force in the competition for power and resources. In Nigeria such competition erupted into a disastrous civil war during 1967-70, when the Ibos made a futile attempt to secede and form their own sovereign nation-state of Biafra. As the example from Nigeria shows, ethnic loyalties are rooted in a system of personal loyalties in which politically ambitious patrons are obligated to reward the political support of their clients with preferential access to jobs, education and investment funds. While corruption and inefficiency thus become built into the operation of the state, ethnic-based allocation of resources reflects attempts by public officials to coopt otherwise powerful social groups and, more generally, to shore up their precarious hold over a heterogeneous population. But such allocation procedures

waste valuable public resources, which are necessary for long-term economic and social development, for short-term political gains. And as the limited supply of resources dwindles state credibility and legitimacy are progressively undermined.

Colonial rule thus contributed to the crisis of African states in that it created inherent political and social contradictions in these emerging societies. It can also be argued, however, that some of these effects were the consequences of the social and economic policies imposed on the colonies. Colonial policies conceived to attain two short-term administrative goals:

- 1) organize local labor, commerce and production in ways that pay for the operation of the state and
 - 2) maintain political control despite the inevitable social dislocations caused by changes in the economy.
- These two goals were inherently contradictory, and colonial policies devised to attain them produced correspondingly uneven results.

Colonial economic policies did not encourage the growth of an industrial economy in Africa. They focused, instead, on expanding the existing labor-intensive, peasant-based agricultural production. African peasants were directly (through laws) and indirectly (cash payments of taxes, a colonial innovation) compelled to shift from food production to cash crop production. Marketing boards were established which regularly paid African producers below-world market prices for their cash crops. Capital investments, where permitted, was restricted to mining concessions monopolized by European firms (as in central and southern Africa) and to large plantations owned by white settlers (as in eastern Africa). In Kenya, for example, African peasants were legally prohibited from producing cash crops which would have competed with European production, and were thus forced to work for low wages in European-owned plantations. Opportunities for Africans to accumulate equity capital were restricted almost exclusively to the more high risk and less profitable ventures—small-scale commerce and transport—shunned by Europeans.

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The net effect, on the one hand, was that a dynamic class of capitalist entrepreneurs, the mainstay of democratic states, failed to develop in Africa under colonial rule. On the other hand, the limited economic, particularly educational, opportunities provided during two generations of colonial rule inevitably fostered a small indigenous middle-class. This educated African elite, composed of lawyers, doctors, civil servants and teachers, a politically vocal segment of the native population, saw the colonial state in ambivalent terms: as a means to improve their own and their societies' social and economic well-being, and as an obstacle to such improvements because it was controlled by Europeans. That this elite spearheaded the nationalist movements was preordained by the contradictions inherent in the colonial situation.

Upon assuming control of the state at independence, however, African elites were confronted with a dilemma. How could they use the state to satisfy their peoples' heady expectations of democracy, freedom and prosperity, (expectations which they themselves had raised during the nationalist struggle) and also advance their own class interests? In Western Europe this dilemma had not occurred because capitalist economies and democratic states developed together. Elsewhere, in Japan and the newly-industrializing countries of the Third World (notably, Brazil, India, Korea and Taiwan), state-led industrialization has fostered a robust middle-class and rapid economic growth. But in Africa an authoritarian but minimal colonial state disrupted the growth of a capitalist economy. Efforts by post-colonial African elites to transform their inherited states into engines of economic growth have floundered. This is caused in part by the fact that the state's colonial-inspired institutions

are unsuited to the task, and in part by the underlying social and economic conditions (ethnicity and limited resources) which severely restrict opportunities for generating the high rates of savings and investment capital necessary for sustained economic growth and development.

Conclusion

There can be no gainsaying that African states are in a crisis. So far, explanations of this crisis remain intellectually misguided, historically shortsighted and analytically simplistic. This article has suggested that at least part of the explanation may be found in Africa's colonial experience, particularly the structure and policies of those colonial powers.

After identifying the cause and the nature of the immense problems that face African leaders and their peoples, observers are wont to recommend solutions. It may be time to recognize that whatever solutions exist, they must come from Africans themselves, albeit, with a good deal of outside help. If the past contains any lesson for outsiders who, like the colonial rulers, claim to know what is best for Africans, it is a lesson which must evoke a sense of humility. Perhaps the most appropriate lesson is contained in an African proverb: "No condition is permanent." □



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