



# HEINRICH BÖLL STIFTUNG

## NORTH AMERICA

### Democracy Promotion and State Failure

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*Including comments by Tom Carothers, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*

Nation-states fail when they cease providing adequate levels of political goods to their citizens. Their governments lose credibility, and the continuing nature of the particular nation-state becomes questionable and illegitimate in the hearts and minds of its inhabitants. Aggrieved factions within the nation-states respond by protesting, by attacking the state, by seeking autonomy, and –ultimately – by seeking to overthrow the existing regime. These parlous nation-states ultimately are consumed by internal violence.

States are much more varied in their capacity and capability than they once were. They are more numerous than they were a half century ago, and the range of their population sizes, physical endowments, wealth, productivity, delivery systems, ambitions, and attainments is much more extensive than ever before. In 1914, in the wake of the crumbling of the Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian empires, there were 55 recognized national polities. In 1919, there were 59 nations. In 1950, that number had reached 69. Ten years later, after the attainment of independence in much of Africa, 90 entities were nations. After many more African, Asian, and Oceanic territories

had become independent, and after the implosion of the Soviet Union, the number of nations jumped to 191. With East Timor's independence in 2002, that number became 192. With such explosive numbers, the inherent fragility of many of the new recruits (15 of Africa's 54 states are landlocked), and the inherent navigational perils of the post-Cold War economic and political terrain, the possibility of failure among a subset of the total remains ever present.

It is true that insufficiently democratic states, or weak democratic states, often are arenas of failure, and have higher risk potentials. But it is

not the fact that they are partial democracies, per se, that causes such risk potentials. Rather it is that they have low levels of governance. And weak security.

States succeed or fail across all or some of these dimensions. But it is according to their performances-according to the levels of their effective delivery of the most crucial political goods-that strong states may be distinguished from weak ones, and weak states from failed or collapsed ones. Political goods are those intangible and hard to quantify claims that citizens once made on

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sovereigns and now make on states. They encompass indigenous expectations, conceivably obligations, inform the local political culture, and together give content to the social contract between ruler and ruled that is at the core of regime/government and citizenry interactions.

The delivery of a range of other desirable political goods becomes possible when a reasonable measure of security has been sustained. Modern states (as successors to sovereigns) provide predictable, recognizable, systematized methods of adjudicating disputes and regulating both the norms and the prevailing mores of a particular society or polity. The essence of that political good usually implies codes and procedures that together comprise an enforceable body of law, security of property and inviolable contracts, an effective judicial system, and a set of norms that legitimate and validate the values embodied in a local version of the rule of law.

Another key political good enables citizens to participate freely, openly, and fully in politics and the political process. This good encompasses the essential freedoms: the right to participate in politics and compete for office; respect and support for national and regional political institutions, such as legislatures and courts; tolerance of dissent and difference; and fundamental civil and human rights.

Other political goods typically supplied by states and expected by their citizenries (although privatized forms are possible) include medical and health care (at varying levels and costs); schools and education instruction (of various kinds and levels); roads, railways, harbors, and other physical infrastructures-the arteries of commerce; communications networks; a money and banking system, usually presided over by a central bank and lubricated by a nationally created currency; a beneficent fiscal and institutional context within which citizens can pursue personal entrepreneurial goals, and potentially prosper; space for the flowering of civil society; and methods of regulating the sharing of the environmental commons. Together, this bundle of political goods, roughly rank ordered, establishes a set of criteria according

to which modern nation-states may be judged strong, weak, or failed.

Failed states are tense, deeply conflicted, dangerous, and contested bitterly by warring factions. In most failed states, government troops battle armed revolts led by one or more rivals. Occasionally, the official authorities in a failed state face two or more insurgencies, varieties of civil unrest, different degrees of communal discontent, and a plethora of dissent directed at the state and at groups within the state.

It is not the absolute intensity of violence that identifies a failed state. Rather, it is the enduring character of that violence (as in recent Angola, Burundi, and the Sudan), the consuming quality of that violence, which engulfs great swaths of states (as in Afghanistan, Burundi, Côte d'Ivoire, the Democratic Republic of the Congo-DRC-Liberia, and Sierra Leone), the fact that much of the violence is directed against the existing government or regime, and the inflamed character of the political or geographical demands for shared power or autonomy that rationalize or justify the violence in the minds of the main insurgents.

The civil wars that characterize failed states usually stem from or have roots in ethnic, religious, linguistic, or other intercommunal enmity. The fear of the other (and the consequent security dilemma) that drives so much ethnic conflict stimulates and fuels hostilities between regimes and subordinate and less-favored groups. Avarice also propels that antagonism, especially when greed is magnified by dreams of loot from discoveries of new, contested, pools of resource wealth such as petroleum deposits, diamond fields, other minerals, or fast-denuded forests.

There is no failed state (broadly, a state in anarchy) without disharmonies between communities. Yet, the simple fact that many weak nation-states include haves and have-nots, and that some of the newer states contain a heterogeneous array of ethnic, religious, and linguistic interests, is more a contributor to, than a root cause of, nation-state failure. State failure cannot be ascribed

primarily to the inability to build nations from a congeries of groups of diverse backgrounds. Nor should it be ascribed baldly to the oppression of minorities by a majority, although such brutalities are often a major ingredient of the impulse toward failure.

Hence democracy promotion has nothing to do with state strength, weakness, or failure. Presumably the presumption underlying this suggestion of democracy promotion's causal role is that introducing democratic norms that do not work somehow weakens a regime's capacity to govern, or emboldens insurgents. But neither result is true, necessarily.

Additionally, there is a suggestion that globalization, free trade or protectionism, observance of modern environmental standards, and other exogenous variables somehow accentuate, or in any event influence, the failure of states. Or democratization reforms do.

But those kinds of propositions misconceive what state failure is. State failure should not be juxtaposed with democracy. Indeed, if we try to understand the mechanisms of failure through the lens of democratic procedure or democracy we misapprehend the phenomenon entirely.

A nation state also fails when it loses legitimacy—when it forfeits the “mandate of heaven.” Its nominal borders become irrelevant. Groups within the nominal borders seek autonomous control within one or more parts of the national territory or, sometimes, even across its international borders. Once the state's capacity to secure itself or to perform in an expected manner recedes, and once what little capacity remains is devoted almost exclusively to the fortunes of a few or to a favored ethnicity or community, then there is every reason to expect less and less loyalty to the state on the part of the excluded and disenfranchised. When the rulers are perceived to be working for themselves and their kin, and not the state, their legitimacy, and the

state's legitimacy, plummets. The state increasingly comes to be perceived as being owned by an exclusive class or group, with all others pushed aside. The social contract that binds inhabitants to an overarching polity becomes breached. Various sets of citizens cease trusting the state. Citizens then naturally turn more and more to the kinds of sectional and community loyalties that are their main recourse in times of insecurity, and their main default source of economic opportunity. They transfer their allegiances to clan and group leaders, some of whom become warlords. These warlords or other local strongmen can derive support from external as well as indigenous supporters. In the wilder, more marginalized corners of failed states, terror can breed along with the prevailing anarchy that naturally accompanies state breakdown and failure.

A *collapsed* state is a rare and extreme version of a failed state. Political goods are obtained through private or ad hoc means. Security is equated with the rule of the strong. A collapsed state exhibits a vacuum of authority. It is a mere geographical expression, a black hole into which a failed polity has fallen. There is dark energy, but the forces of entropy have over-whelmed the radiance that hitherto provided some semblance of order and other vital political goods to the inhabitants (no longer the citizens) embraced by language or ethnic affinities or borders. When Somalia failed in the late 1980s, it soon collapsed. Bosnia, Lebanon, and Afghanistan collapsed more than a decade ago, and Nigeria and Sierra Leone collapsed in the 1990s. When those collapses occurred, substate actors took over, as they always do when the prime polity disappears. Those warlords, or substate actors, gained control over regions and subregions within what had been a nation-state, built up their own local security apparatuses and mechanisms, sanctioned markets and other trading arrangements, and even established an attenuated form of international relations. By definition illegitimate and unrecognized, warlords can assume the trappings of a new quasi-state, such as the internationally unrecognized Somaliland in

the old north of Somalia. Despite the parceling out of the collapsed state into warlord fiefdoms, there still is a prevalence of disorder, anomic behavior, and the kinds of anarchic mentality and

entrepreneurial endeavors-especially gun and drug trafficking-that are compatible with external networks of terror.

## Remarks

Tom Carothers, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

I agree that as a general matter democracy promotion should not be avoided out of a fear of weakening states. Several recent events in Africa, such as the eruption of violence in Kenya after the December 2007 elections there, have prompted a minor revival of the argument that elections are bad for African societies because those societies are divided along ethnic or tribal lines. This is a new version of the old argument from the 1960s and 1970s that Africa is not ready for democracy or just not suited for democracy at all.

State building can be seen, in very general fashion, as occurring in two major phases. In the first phase, a state gains control over a set territory, establishes a monopoly of force, and sets up some basic state institutions for core functions, like security and raising revenue. In the second phase, a state proceeds along an extended path of strengthening itself, with the objective of becoming a well functioning state capable of providing a wide array of services. The first phase has little to do with democracy building and there is little sense in pushing a state toward open political competition and pluralism when it is in that first phase. In the second phase, however, democratization can be compatible with or even helpful to the state building process. The idea that authoritarian states are somehow naturally better at the second phase of state building than democratic states is incorrect. A basic contradiction exists between an authoritarian state's determination to maintain tight political control over all institutions and the fact that a well functioning state must be free of constant political interference and manipulation. In contrast, no such basic contradiction exists between a democratic state and a well functioning state. It is certainly true that some features of new democracies, like their usually weak political parties and the short-term outlook of politicians, can work against state building. But these are much lesser problems than the fundamental contradiction between authoritarianism and the building of an effective, accountable state.