



Life Goes on and Business as Usual: The Challenge of Failed States

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When I launched the concept of state collapse nearly 15 years ago, I wanted to identify a phenomenon that needed specific analytical and policy attention. The phenomenon was in its second round, and called for an analysis of its causes as well as its remedies. Collapse was defined as a situation where the structure, authority (legitimate power), law and political order have fallen apart (Zartman 1995, 1). States collapse because they can no longer perform the functions required of them to pass as states (Zartman 1995, 5). Etiologically, collapse was seen as the end point of a process that is common to many new states but that in most cases is stopped and reversed before the finalizing collapse is reached.¹ Although characteristics appeared, no clear series of steps could be identified. In general, we have done better in analysing the causes than in finding appropriate corrective responses, so it may be time to take a second look at both.

Since the initial study, the concept was rapidly adopted but broadened, and in the process lost its specific focus as the notion of collapse has been replaced by the idea of failure. There has been much literature on failed states, but it is not clear

whether failure is the process itself or its result. States can fail at one or more tasks and still not fail as states, across the board, and so the concept of failure becomes task-specific (if specific at all) and not a process going somewhere. Identifying areas of failure, however, permits attention to specific weaknesses, as the focus shifts from the whole to the parts. On the other hand, collapse is posed as a specific and identifiable condition, but it becomes a challenge to declare when a state has reached that point, rather than being simply close to it. A number of the chapters in the original work mulled over the question whether the state has really imploded or was simply extremely restricted in its area of control, or application (although there is consensus that Somalia is the textbook case of state collapse).

Causes and Courses. Attempts to better understand the causes of state collapse can go back to a recognition of the two phases as they occurred in Africa. The first phase came in the late 1970s and early 1980s when the regimes replacing the original nationalist generation in Chad, Ghana and Uganda proved unable to correct the weakness of their predecessors and added to them weaknesses of their own. Having destroyed the nationalist regime that rode into power on the success of independence but proved

¹ A presentation at the time before the Nigerian mission to the UN, describing the process and then characteristics of collapse, elicited the spontaneous response from someone in the audience, "My God, we're all there!"

better at destroying colonial governance than in bringing in a governing ability of their own, the new regime in turn showed greater capability in removing the nationalists than in improving on their governing, and along with the nationalists they removed their legitimacy as well. They could not raise resources or make decisions to solve current problems. Deficient in resources, legitimacy, ability, and security, the state collapsed.

This is the soft state scenario. In the particular cases, it took a military coup to oust the nationalist generation, but the eventual soft state could be military or civilian. It took a new military regime to pull the state out of its collapsed condition, both because it seems to take a strongman to rebuild the state and because—almost by definition—it takes the military to make a cup, even against a collapsed state. Read differently, however, the events indicated that civil society was also so weakened by the condition of the state that it was unable to provide a rebuilding replacement. The soft state was nested in a softened society. In other cases, however, the replacement regime was able to hang onto power, avoiding the collapse of its state by focusing on one of its functions, security, and capitalizing on the similar absence of a civil society to challenge it. This is the hard or brittle state scenario, exemplified in Somalia, Chad, and perhaps also Burma and Sri Lanka.

The second wave of state collapse came in the early 1990s, for different reasons. Here hard states fell under their own weight, pushed more or less resolutely

by a civil society reaction in various forms. The collapsing state was made vulnerable by the fact that it had pulled into itself, conducted governance for a narrow, often ethnically identifiable few, alienating the rest of the population for its own benefit. Instead of a country, the state had become a castle. Interestingly, this phase came at the same time as the second wave of democratization, at least in Africa, a widespread popular movement that claimed the complement of self-government that independence had brought in only incompletely. Whereas the end of colonial rule brought government of the people by and for the nationalist movement claiming to incarnate the nation, the popular movement of the 1990s, inspired by the rise of universal citizenship in South Africa and the overthrow of single-party regimes in communist countries, claimed governance by and for themselves.

The most remarkable expression of this movement was the Sovereign National Conference (CNS, using its French initials) that, in 12 countries of West and Central Africa beginning in 1990, took sovereignty away from the authoritarian ruler and, at the hands of civil society organizations, wrote a new constitutions and opened multiparty elections. In many places, such as Benin (where the CNS movement began), Niger, Mali, Congo-B, CAR, the state was brittle with clay feet and fell easily. The length of the period of collapse depended on the strength of the replacing civil society regime, and in some cases outside of Africa, the transition from a hard state to a new more open one was accomplished with the cooperation of the outgoing regime and

without violence or collapse; this was, of course, the case of Russia and South Africa. In other places, it took a strong violent reaction to bring about the collapse of the state, as in such diverse countries as Ethiopia, Somalia, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Congo and Yugoslavia. Again, the degree and length of collapse varied according to various conditions in the country. In Yugoslavia, for example, collapse moved from the federal republic to some of its constituent republics such as Bosnia, whereas most of the other republics picked up governance without collapse. In Congo, collapse began in the previous decade as Mobutu privatized the state in his own pocket and the effects continued at least through the 1990s, possibly a decade more.

In between these two African phases, state collapse was induced elsewhere in the world by a combination of the two phases' characteristics—a strong reaction from excluded populations but occurring in the earlier period of the 1970s. In Lebanon, Colombia and Sri Lanka, rebellion against the state by two crosscutting excluded categories—younger generation and new social forces—rose against a functioning but unrepresentative state. But only in Lebanon was it so widespread as to bring the state into collapse. In the other two cases, the state remained relatively strong within much of the country but lost a part of its territory and population, a condition similar to that in Sudan. Probably the most extreme case, which came out of phase, is Iraq, where it took a foreign invasion to bring democratization more rapidly than it was able to bring replacement of the state it collapsed.

Effects and Opportunities. These diverse national stories oblige us to step back and look for overarching characteristics, regardless of time. First, it is the state that collapses itself, in one of two ways. Either it is so soft as to be incapable of functioning, short of resources, decision-making capability, and legitimacy. Or it is so hard as to be brittle, withdrawn into its castle with its drawbridge raised, alienating and alienated from the rest of the population.

Second, state collapse does not require violent rebellion but sometimes it helps. In the case of the brittle state, it can keep on functioning in its concentrated way as long as there is no one left to push it over and reveal its hollow core, and so rebellion is the coup de grace. In the case of the soft state, collapse need not involve violence.

Third, state collapse can be of varying duration and even various intensities (back again to the threshold problem of the definition). Extreme cases of duration such as Somalia and Congo exhibit different degrees of intensity; similar cases of extreme intensity such as Somalia, Liberia, Sierra Leone and Lebanon exhibit different durations.

Fourth, state collapse does not necessarily mean societal collapse. Again, there seem to be two types: either the imploding state takes civil society with it, destroying civil society in the case of a brittle state or simply reflecting its weakness in the case of a soft state; or civil society pulls back into itself at the local level and makes do, performing resiliently and filling the gap left locally by the state. Civil society has both a modern and a traditional component. It can involve

communal structures, elders and traditional religious leaders, and ethnic identities, as well as professional groups, modern labor, traders, and warlords. Faith in elders and traditional leaders as the repositories of customary solidarity is not sufficient for restoration and is often irrelevant; societal leaders often tend to follow the powerful, be they politicians or warlords.

Fifth, state collapse, of the brittle or the soft variety, leaves a society hungry for a normal life, responsive government, and a source of legitimacy, law and order. Implications are contradictory. On one hand, the atmosphere for restoration and reconstruction is encouraging. Even though the population has been alienated by narrow governance and has been taught that the state is predatory by nature, hope springs eternal and with it support for reformist movements and strongmen. On the other hand, the same tendency supports quick fixes and snake charmers, especially when their appeal is clothed in higher and traditional values. It is significant that every real and impending Islamist takeover—from Iran in 1979, to Sudan in 1989, Algeria in 1991, Afghanistan in 1995, Palestine 2007, Somalia in 2006, and Egypt in the current context—has been based not on a deeply religious population but on a protest movement against a corrupt, inefficient, self-serving state.

Sixth, life goes on, as best it can, even if unregulated by the collapsed state. This means that people continue to find means of subsistence, networks of commerce, alternative means of education, even primitive methods of adjudication. Since the state is, after all, an imaginary construction

of individuals performing particular tasks, these functions can continue in an unstructured way or within alternative structures. These structures are necessarily inefficient and unroutinized, legitimized only by their own performance (the highest level, curiously, in Weber's conceptualization), but they are also up for grabs, and sometimes the grabbing is a chaotic, roughneck business. Thus state collapse presents an entrepreneurial opportunity.

Seventh, in the globalized world, states may collapse but they stay alive in their farflung diaspora. It is an aspect of the current world that a state's political but also social and economic space is much larger than its territory. In times of collapse, many of the usual ties are only accentuated. Economic resources are sent home as trade and remittances, the country exports population to swell the diaspora, political movements and leaders are trafficked back and forth between home and host countries. This gives both transfusions of vital substances to the weakened society and predatory opportunities for political and economic entrepreneurs.

Eighth, a more detailed analysis would reveal that collapsed states cluster. Links of contagion exist within each cluster, especially in the form of transnational rebel and expatriate opposition movements, refugee and IDP burdens, narcotics transshipments, and migrant labor movements. None of these constitute a single cause in themselves but together they add up to burdens on the governing capacity of the state; weakened, the state cannot

handle its challenges, which in turn further weaken the state. A more detailed diachronic analysis would also show that the cancer of collapse spread from an initial case into its neighbors.

Ninth, little work has been done on the effect of state collapse on the watching world, and the study that has been done is ambiguous. On one hand, the absence of authority means that players who would otherwise be controlled are free to operate. On the other hand, it also means that the international communications resources on which they depend are not available, and the conditions of security that they require are not present. A well-functioning society with loose control is far better for international outlaws than unproductive anarchy

Presence and Futures. On this background, it can be instructive to look at the prospects of state collapse at the present time (the prospects of various levels of failure would take a much longer time). Two current estimates of state weakness and instability (Fund for Peace-Carnegie 2006, Brookings 2008, numbers below referring to respective ratings) give only slightly differing evaluations. The bottom ten rankings, indicating collapsed or nearly collapsed states, are::

Congo (2-3); Somalia (6-1); Sudan (1-6); Iraq (4-4); Afghanistan (10-2); Zimbabwe (5-8) and Ivory Coast (3-10); Haiti (8-12), Burundi (15-5), CAR (13-7), and Liberia (11-9); Chad (6-16); DPRK (14-15) and Sierra Leone (16-13); Guinea (11-23).

The pattern of clusters mentioned above is evident. There is a Mideast Group

(Afghanistan, Iraq), a Horn-Central Africa Group (Somalia, Sudan, Chad, CAR, Congo, Burundi), a West Africa Group (Ivory Coast, Liberia, Sierra Leone), and 2 outliers. The links of contagion already discussed tie these groups together, so that with time one spot extends its effects on its neighbor. Research with a slightly different focus has shown that conflict is hard to shake, so that states with internal conflict are highly likely to have recurrent conflict within 5 years. The effects of internal conflict so waken the state that it becomes hard to escape the Conflict Trap (Collier et al 2003). Another aspect bears mention: some of these states (Haiti, Somalia) are chronic cases, but others (Zimbabwe, Ivory Coast) are formerly well-to-do societies where a functioning state went haywire, essentially for reasons of catastrophically poor political judgment.

The resulting picture is spotty. Certainly state collapse is not sweeping the world. If there are some new candidates, such as Ivory Coast and Zimbabwe, there are others that have emerged from collapse with some success, such as Ghana and Uganda. It is not obvious that others are waiting in the wings. One positive development in the evolution of African politics portrayed above is the current predominant mode of “democratic authoritarianism,” based on a predominant party, regular elections, and a coopting political and economic elite that provides some stability, representation, legitimacy and responsiveness. This does not mean that failure is extinct but rather that it is manageable.

Managing comes from society, not from the outside. Three African cases—Uganda, Liberia and Ghana—indicate that it comes on a white horse, through a strong person who restores government responsibility and faith in the state. Help can come from the outside, in financial and technical assistance (including security forces if necessary), but there must be something to assist. Even more difficult are traditionally acephalic societies like Somalia, where every clan wants to have its own horseman, collective leadership, which since Roman times has been notoriously unstable, seems to be the indicated structure.

Another element is the strengthening of surrounding states so that the contagion of collapse is contained. Strong states surrounding weaker ones can form a protection against the spread of regional cancer, provide a model for their neighbor, and can help legitimize domestic remedies.

Importantly, the best remedy is preventive. As seen, movements to overthrow a weak state are most frequently protest reactions to corrupt, inefficient government. Foreign efforts, such as the Millennium Challenge Account that reward well performing states, and domestic efforts, through an active civil society, provide the best way of preventing state collapse.

This text was presented by Prof. Zartman at the event 'The Unrelenting Logic of Business as Usual: Piracy and Commerce in Failed States', which is part of a talk Series entitled 'The (Un)Making of Failing States: Profits, Risks and Measures of Failure'. The first talk 'The Unrelenting Logic of Business as Usual: Piracy and Commerce in Failed States'. More information in <http://www.boell.org>
