

Africa's Revolutionary Deficit

In many parts of Africa, anyone can start a revolution. And that's the problem.

By Jeremy M. Weinstein

S omalia is once again on the front page—and the news isn't pretty. Since 2003, the country's seaside capital of Mogadishu has served as an arena for a battle of gladiators, pitting U.S.-backed warlords against gun-toting Islamic revolutionaries. With no capable or legitimate state to counter it, the Union of Islamic Courts emerged victorious last June, only to be felled in December by an enfeebled transitional government, formed in exile and backed by the Ethiopian military. A recent spate of assassination-style killings and suicide bombings herald the arrival of a new resistance movement intent on ejecting these foreign forces and the African Union troops now being dispatched to the country. Caught in the midst of this violent morass is Somalia's long-suffering population of 8 million, seeking order from whomever can provide it, simply hoping that the bully who comes out on top will care enough to reverse the country's economic collapse.

Somalia may be garnering headlines today, but the country's strife parallels the bloodshed in far too many of Africa's struggling nations. Violence has engulfed 27 of the 46 countries in sub-Saharan Africa since independence, and the revolutionary movements that emerged to wage these wars of "liberation"

and "transformation" have rarely behaved better than the regimes they sought to uproot. In Sierra Leone, the Revolutionary United Front publicly challenged decades of corrupt leadership as it hacked its way through the countryside, killing and maiming thousands of civilians in its quest for control of the nation's diamond mines. After the fall of Mobutu Sese Seko in the Democratic Republic of the Congo in 1997, a patchwork of competing militias and warlords ruled the vast eastern provinces, promising clean government and a return to democracy, while looting homes and raping women at will. In the past 10 years, the story has been no different in Angola, the Central African Republic, Chad, Congo, and Liberia: rebels trampling on civilian populations in their quest to capture the capital.

Why have Africa's civil wars so rarely produced revolutionary movements that fight for the political and economic changes that the population deserves? The answer is as simple as the violence is troubling.

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In much of Africa, the barriers to entry for rebel movements are simply too low. With states often incapable of projecting power outside of cities and insurgents easily able to finance their own private armies, just about anyone can hoist a flag, arm recruits, and launch a revolution. Building a rebel army should be difficult, in principle, because young people must risk their lives for highly uncertain returns. But in much of Africa, initiating a rebellion may be easier than starting a business.

Unlike early nation-states in Europe, where rulers depended on citizens for taxes and built strong states to protect them in return, Africa's state-building process has often gone awry. Seldom do rebel leaders turn to civilians for the resources needed to field private armies. War is becoming cheaper, and the means to wage it flow from illicit trafficking in natural resources, contributions from abroad, or networks of expats—not from the voluntary contributions of those who most need political change. Legitimacy, too, depends not on popular support but simply on achieving control of the capital city, from where access to a seat at the United Nations provides all the protections of sovereignty. With such a system in place, is it really any surprise that civilian populations have been largely ignored by Africa's revolutionaries?

The great irony is that in a part of the world where civil war is endemic, Africa faces a dispiriting shortage of true revolutionaries—members of movements committed to replacing decades of misrule with effective, transparent governance. Only in places where armies have been mobilized with the most meager resources have we witnessed the birth of insurgencies that protect and advocate for the poor. But in countries rich in natural resources, where elites loot the land rather than provide public goods for ordinary people, civilians have been cursed with abusive insurgencies. These are environments in which an

opportunistic form of rebellion is most attractive—where the barriers to organizing an army are low, the pickings are good, and constructive revolutionary movements tend to be crowded out by criminals.

War must be made more expensive in Africa. That means redoubling efforts to choke the sources of

financial support that prop up rebel armies. Stemming the trade in illicit resources is an important first step, but insurgent movements draw heavily on financing provided by neighboring governments. Just as governments were pressured by international non-governmental organizations to clamp down on



Africa has the wrong rebels at the right time.

the trade in blood diamonds and other illegally traded resources, cross-border support for rebel groups must be unearthed, publicized, and penalized. Civil-society organizations have a role to play, but ultimately governments, acting through the U.N. Security Council, must make external alliances with rebels more costly. Diaspora financing, too, given its origins in rich countries, can be stopped at its source. And the proliferation of small arms and light weapons—technologies that diminish the costs of raising an army—requires urgent international attention. Rich countries continue to be among the most substantial producers and distributors of small arms; they should also demonstrate a clear commitment to stronger export and border controls and more aggressive efforts to dismantle trafficking networks, perhaps in the form of an international arms trade treaty.

Part of the challenge is that sovereignty accrues to whomever mobilizes the guns and men required to take a capital. But sovereignty, with all of its benefits, should be conditional. Putting it into practice, however, means abandoning decades of U.N. impartiality and recognizing that rebel movements, like governments, wear different stripes. A seat at the table should be a privilege, and it should be reserved for those who earn it. **FP**