

Some reflections from the DRC experience

This presentation will draw on recent empirical research in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The objective of the talk is to draw lessons from the DRC experience about the way we think about the state generally. In particular, I want to question how useful is the concept of the state as an organization that has the monopoly of brute force, in isolation from the society from where it emerges. Instead, it can be useful to think of the state as an extension of society itself. I will make three comments. The comments are unified under the theme: monopoly of violence and social structure and draw mostly on my own research simply because this is the one I know.

Point 1: The first point is that the state apparatus is permeated by society. Rather than being an autonomous bureaucracy imposed over society to regulate it, the state is used by social groups to their advantage, often through the capillarity offered by the room to use public office for the gain of one's social group.

I will begin by mentioning the results of a field experiment about contract enforcement in the province of Sud Kivu. In Sud Kivu, the so-called Bantu have been known to co-exist for millennia. There are multiple ethnic groups. The provincial administration and the judiciary particularly are staffed by the Bantu. On the other hand, there are the Banyamulenges, recent descendents of Rwanda. The provincial administration, staffed by Bantus, is biased against the Banyamulenge. In the experiment, urban dwellings make purchases on credit. In some purchases, the promise is written in a contract, in other, it is not. Formal contracts are only useful to incentivize buyers to pay if they are used by merchants of the Bantu groups. They have no effect otherwise. This suggests buyers know there is a bias in the judiciary inherent against Banyamulenge. Furthermore, formal contracts, when used by the Bantu, cannot out-compete the effect of ethnicity for the governance of informal transactions. Buyers who are matched to a merchant of their own ethnic group are as likely to pay as if they sign a formal contract and formal contracts do not improve over and above ethnicity.

The take-away is that society is strongly organized informally without the state, and, in fact, controls the administration of the state for its interests. This does not demonstrate, but is suggestive the state cannot outperform the mechanisms developed by society well before the creation of the Congolese state. Even as some parts of society are losers from the capture of the state by the Bantu, it is worth entertaining the possibility that the reason the state is not more representative and stronger is that the losers are not enough to motivate the state to change, because it serves the interests of the dominant groups who already function well within groups, and who otherwise can use the state for their interests using their in-group access.

I will then discuss a study conducted in the traffic police. We typically think as the monopoly of violence as an organization that can be fixed, for instance, by redressing the incentives of individual bureaucrats. Once their incentives are aligned, we think that the state now functions. One strategy often considered

to redress the bureaucrats' incentives is to increase their wage, assumed to be inefficiently low from the perspective of public service. Increasing the wage can have two benefits. The first is that it increases the cost of losing one's job, because it makes the job more valuable, hence incentivizing bureaucrats to be disciplined. The second is that, especially for low income countries, state officials are craving for resources for survival, and they use their job as a vehicle to satisfy their survival needs. Hence, raising the wage of state officials produces another type of "efficiency wage" logic, by inducing a so-called "income effect:" well fed officials will be in less need to sacrifice their moral principles and to defect on society in order to gain a few extra units of revenue.

I conducted an experiment that suggests that this assumption, however, hinges on the assumption that bureaucrats operate in isolation from social structure. The study demonstrated that street level police officers have a. entrenched contracts with their supervisors for sharing the benefits from corruption; b. entrenched agreements with drivers so that drivers pay bribes in exchange for some forms of public service. These two modifications upon the standard view lead the standard state strengthening predictions to fail. The first is because the income of state officials is part of these agreements with their supervisors, hence increasing their income leads to upward leakage, reducing the effect of extra income. The second is that if society has found a way to collude with civil servants by paying bribes in exchange for service, increasing the income of civil servants makes them more independent from society, thus less prone to be bribed but also, then, to provide public service as it provides an autonomous source of income. If the state has not developed alternative capacity that can substitute for the agreements with society, this increase in income can induce more losses through the dis-incentivizing of public service than it can induce benefits through the decrease of corruption effort it induces.

In our study, joint with Kristof Titeca, we found that doubling the daily income of street-level police officials resulted in 30% being informally taxed by their commanders. The remaining residual income that police officers were able to keep led them to be satisfied, sometimes leaving their post and consuming it. As a result, we found that it mildly worsened traffic, increasing the probability that traffic jams were observed.

The take-away is that underlying social relations govern the behavior of the state. Hence standard interventions that ignore the inter-linkages between the state and society, typically agreements and contracts that are enforced through repeated interaction and that are invisible to the lens of the state and of foreign donors themselves, can lead these interventions to interact with the pre-existing social structure and potentially backlash.

Point 2: The second point is that the behavior of the purveyors of violence beyond the coercive apparatus of the state is also itself governed by social relationships.

This comment will indicate that armed groups, whatever is their political or economic objective, are subject to the fundamental laws of incentives, and that those are tied to society. In particular, in a series of studies, I find evidence that armed groups' behavior is disciplined by their expectations of what they can extract from society. Armed groups need to steal from society to continue surviving. If they can hope to settle in a particular economy, they will transform arbitrary theft into predictable theft that minimizes economic losses, taxation, because they benefit from economic development themselves through taxation. This idea, that was used as a metaphor for the state itself first by Mancur Olson

(Stationary bandit) has implications for how we think about the strategies for extending the monopoly of violence by the state over the areas outside its monopoly. If their behavior is governed by the relationships that determine their incentives, then any intervention that perturbs this equilibrium will also affect the behavior of such armed groups through other ways than originally intended.

This is particularly visible in one episode of recent Congolese history. The Kimia II intervention, which in 2010 aimed to eradicate the FDLR (a Rwandan armed group who was known for perpetrating atrocities against the population), sharply affected the FDLR time horizon, and undermined its disciplining effect on the FDLR. While the FDLR had settled for years in the area that was going to be targeted (Mwenga, in Sud Kivu) and had developed some form of stability, stable extraction, protection, a justice system and had even created markets (they were far from being well-intended, but their interests had aligned partly with society as a result of their time horizon), the announcement of this military campaign drastically reduced the FDLR's time horizon. As a result, the FDLR turned into pillaging the very same households that they were originally protecting.

This example, supported by empirical research I conducted with co-authors, indicates that social structures govern the production of violence creating an underlying order that is, again, invisible to the lens of the state and the foreign states. Far from ruling out force as a way for states to assert much needed authority in the long run, the results shed a note of caution on using force (and any other strategy) to assert their territorial control, due to the unintended consequences at least in the short run. They also elicit the architecture of order has social and economic roots.

Source: "Dis-organizing violence: stationary bandits, and the time horizon," with Miguel Ortiz and David (Qihang) Wu

Point 3: Racketeering the way into the state.

The third point I want to make is a conjecture based on years of qualitative research, but that has not been tested. I want to suggest that the repeated nature of the relationships between the state and non-state actors is often important to understand the behavior of armed actors.

In particular, the Congolese all-inclusive peace agreement signed in 2004, so-called Sun City agreement, was originally thought to find a bargained solution and avoid more years of wasteful and destructive conflict. When we think of conflict statically, it is best to avoid conflict, which destroys resources, and instead find bargained outcomes. However, the decision to bargain by the central government sends a message to future potential armed actors, that benefits can be obtained by using force. This can make the bargained monopoly of violence costly, by incentivizing entry into the violent business for extorting the state. This is what may have happened in the DRC.

In 2004, for the Sun City agreement, there was a handful of armed groups in Congo. The largest group was a few factions of the RCD, a satellite group of Rwanda and Uganda, and somewhat coordinated popular insurgencies under the banner of Mayi-Mayi's. There was also the FDLR. The agreement provided attractive positions in the state to the officers of the rebel groups, and other opportunities to other members. As a result, the armed groups part of the agreement vacated.

My fieldwork does not demonstrate, but suggests, that the willingness to bargain the spoils of the state sends a message that force can be used to obtain resources. As a result of the peace agreement:

- Rebel factions were integrated into the state armed forces, with imperfect removal of their social linkages and objectives, implying de facto that the Congolese army was infiltrated by criminal groups and by rebel interests. This explains the systematic multiplication of protection rackets by the Congolese army on society on the one hand, and subsequent mutinies in years to come, by the Tutsi factions of the army who were funneling resources for the interests of the neighboring country of Rwanda, who was socially tied to the Tutsi.
- Repeated rebellions promoted by Rwanda (for instance CNDP, M23 movements) continued to emerge with somewhat not public goals that related to negotiations with Kinshasa. Rwanda, and their local allies, had understood that force was a productive way to negotiate concessions away from Rwanda, at a time where a full on invasion of the Congo was perhaps not politically feasible given the pressure of the international community. These rebellions could be understood as a form of international under cover extortion.
- Today, there are 140 armed groups in Eastern Congo alone. While it is impossible to link the peace agreement to the sharp rise in the number of armed groups, many of them have a mission statement that includes “political recognition.” In their own words, political recognition is that the leadership can obtain valuable positions inside the Congolese army, which they view as the most secure employment in the violent sector, and their soldiers can be integrated. Ideally, for them, the warlords would continue to rule under their territory. In practice, they are often supposed to be reallocated to other areas, but sometimes manage to remain in their area of interest. As a result, they continue to enjoy local monopolies of violence, but with the support of the central government.

I will close my remarks emphasizing the importance of a particular form of social organization, prevalent across societies but particularly strong in a significant number of Sub-Saharan countries: big men. The concept of “wealth in people,” popular in anthropology and history, appears to be a prevalent theme not just in how societies are organized in the area, but in how society permeates the state in the DRC.

Society tends to be organized in terms of big men. Big men have followers, and the services offered by followers (which include protection, attacks, and simply labor) is the basis of the power of big men. Followers serve the big men because of loyalty. It is unclear what the source of loyalty is (whether it arises from a rational calculus in a repeated game or whether it is a fundamental cultural form of social preferences) but it is clear that loyalty is the glue that ties this social organization together. People try to become big men by indebting others, through favors, the most frequent of which is giving a job, where revenue (legal or criminal) can be derived. Upon making a favor, the big man creates the loyalty of a follower.

In my view, this aspect of Congolese society is fundamental to understand how the state functions, and the logic of people’s relationship with the state. There is an open door between civilians and bureaucrats and the army, so that the structure of big men permeates the state and big men use the state to nurture their status and informal power, allocating jobs, protecting corrupt revenues, etc. It is

perhaps this resulting structure of society that is perhaps more important to understand the evolution of the failed state, and the formal attributes of the state itself.

One historical, tragic example of this is the rise of Mobutu to be the most powerful man of the country. It is quite likely that by giving Mobutu the power to hire, the post-colonial government had handed over the keys to a technology to produce loyal followers, which skyrocketed the de facto power of Mobutu to be more than the state itself, and ultimately took over. In light of this social structure, labor demand by the colonial and post-colonial administrations likely played an important role in distorting and amplifying the de facto social organization of power by drastically empowering a small subset of big men, undermining potentially a balance of power that may or may not have been functional prior to external influence. Similar caution thus is important to have today.

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