Civil Peace and Commitment to Ethno-Regional Redistribution in Africa,

by

Jean-Paul Azam,

ARQADE and IDEI, University of Toulouse,
and Institut Universitaire de France.

Abstract: State formation in Africa is a transition process starting from an institutional endowment of ethnic division. Ethnic capital in Africa ensures the provision of many services that a modern state has taken over in rich countries, including security, education, rules of behaviour, etc. Most African states are so far unable to deliver all these services adequately, and must go through an initial phase of federation of ethnic groups, before they can provide a credible substitute to ethnic capital. The system of redistribution within and among groups is the key to creating the solidarity links between them, and its breakdown is liable to trigger the eruption of political violence.

1. Introduction

For each example of an ethnically divided African country that has been victim of a civil war, one can present several examples of equally divided African countries which have managed to remain peaceful, and where all the ethnic tensions have been smoothed out in the political process, or have resulted only in extremely limited violence. In fact, only a minority of African states have experienced serious insurgencies while all the African countries are ethnically divided.

This paper argues that ethnic problems are only one aspect of political violence in Africa, while violent conflicts are resulting from a failure of the state to perform some of its fundamental tasks. State formation in Africa is a transition process from an institutional endowment of ethnic division. Ethnic capital ensures to most African people the provision of many services that a modern state has taken over in rich countries, including security, social insurance, education, norms of behaviour, contract enforcement, justice, etc. Both the state and the ethnic group obey some ‘constitutional’ rules, enforced more or less strongly by some authority. If one defines the state in a Weberian way, as having the monopoly over coercion, then one must regard the African states as being at a formation stage, as the kin group and the ethnic group exert also some substantial coercive power. Most African states are so far unable to deliver adequately all the services that the ethnic group provides, and must go through a phase of federation of ethnic groups, before they can provide a credible substitute to ethnic capital. The system of redistribution within and among groups is the key to creating the solidarity links between them, and its breakdown triggers the eruption of political violence.

The state and the ethnic groups are connected by the participation of the elite of the latter to the former. Ethnic groups, and their constituent parts kin groups, invest collectively in the out-migration of their fittest members, which generally is associated with some investment in education, with a view to get them involved in the urban elite. Economists have emphasised the function of insurance that results from the diversification of income risk by migration and
the ensuing flow of remittances. Even in case of mild shocks, the flow of remittances, and of gifts, maintains some links between the migrant and his group of origin.

Not less important is the fact that sending educated members of the ethnic group to the city, via the education system, is a means to ensure political participation for the group. In peaceful African countries, a system of inclusion of the educated people from the different ethnic groups in various organisations (students unions, single party, etc.) has evolved, whereby the state purchases loyalty from the groups through their educated urbanite ‘delegates’. At election times, the latter have to go back to the village for mobilising a renewed support for the state. In Côte d’Ivoire, for example, former President Houphouët-Boigny was a maestro in the art of buying the loyalty of the most active representatives of the different ethnic groups (Azam and Morrisson, 1994). Together with a policy of visible public investment in the various regions, this flow or redistribution provided the cement of the emerging Ivoirian nation. This country had initially a dangerous partition into four main ethnic groups, all of them strongly related to groups living on the other side of its borders, together with a religious division between the Muslims in the north and the Christians in the south. Collier and Hoeffler (1998) have shown econometrically that, ceteris paribus, ethno-linguistic fractionalisation acts in a non linear fashion on the probability of civil war, with the maximum risk occurring at about two or three ethnic groups. Nevertheless, with one exception in 1970 when the Bété Kragbé Gnagbé was killed by the army, with his followers, this country avoided ethnic violence ever since independence.

This illustrates that the maintenance of civil peace is one of the fundamental tasks of a development state in Africa, that is often neglected by more ethnically dominated governments. Milton Obote and Idi Amin, in Uganda, for example, have shown exactly the opposite behaviour to Houphouët’s, by indulging in massive favoritism to the benefit of their minority ethnic group from the north, which was overwhelmingly represented in the army, and to the detriment of the majority Baganda group, resulting in a long history of civil war and atrocities (Mutibwa, 1992). Then, the ethnic group is the natural component of a rebellion
against the state, as the many links that exist among its members provide an efficient way of overcoming the free-rider problems involved in mobilising a rebellion. This is probably why many observers blame African civil wars on ethnic division, while the failure of the state to maintain peace is the root cause of the problem.

The next section presents the basic theoretical argument according to which redistribution of the state’s resources is the core issue in the war/peace problem. Section 3 discusses briefly how the ethnic group is itself based on re-distribution, and how the educated elite from each group can be federated into a state, using the intra-ethnic redistribution for purchasing political support.

2. Commitment to Redistribution : The Basic Argument

Azam (forthcoming) uses a model of conflict to bring out the role of commitment to redistribution of the state’s resources within a peace-keeping policy, with special references to conflicts in African countries. Azam, Berthélemy and Calipel (1996) have provided an empirical analysis that supports this analysis, on African data, showing that the level of public expenditures with a clear redistributive content (primary education, health expenditures, etc.) has a negative impact on the probability of political violence. Moreover, participation in the CFA Zone is found to reduce this risk. I come back on this « CFA exception » below.

The Basic Model

Assume we have two organised ethnic groups facing each other. One is in power, controlling the state’s resources, and the potential opponent only controls its own output from productive activity. The government can use two instruments : building up its defence forces, in order to try and deter any insurgency by the opponent, or share part of the state’s resources with a view to reduce the incentives that the opponent faces for building up its own forces and rebel. If the two sides have engaged their forces, then the outcome of the fight is random, as a function of the relative forces engaged. The winner takes over the state, and consume all its
resources. Standard game theory teaches us that the outcome of this game depends on the commitment capacity of the government.

**Game 1 : No Commitment :**

**Step 1 :** The government engages its forces and promises to deliver some public good that benefits the opposing group, without commitment.

**Step 2 :** The opposing group chooses to build up its forces, knowing the defence put up by the government, and the cheap promises of redistribution.

**Step 3 :** Either the fight takes place, and one of the group wins the pot, or, if the fight has been avoided, the government may or may not deliver the promised public good.

It is clear that the opposing group would be a fool to believe that the government will keep its word: once the fight has been avoided, the government has no incentive to deliver the public good. Hence, at step 2, the opposing group will choose to build up its forces, unless the deterrence is too strong. Therefore, the absence of a credible commitment to produce the public good that benefits the opponent is liable to either trigger a civil war, or else maintain peace under a military regime, that deters rebellion by maintaining a threatening level of defence forces.

**Game 2 : Credible Commitment to Share the State’s Resources:**

**Step 1 :** The government engages its forces and promises to deliver some public good that benefits the opposing group, with a credible commitment.

**Step 2 :** The opposing group chooses to build up its forces, knowing the defence put up by the government, as well as the credible promises of redistribution.

**Step 3 :** Either the fight takes place, and one of the group wins the pot, or, if the fight has been avoided, the government does deliver the promised public good.
Now, the opposing group faces a different choice: there is a level of redistribution that, should the government deliver it, would make rebellion unattractive. Rebellion is dangerous, and people are going to engage in it only if the expected payoff is worth taking the risk. The expected payoff is partly determined by the difference between what can be gained by taking the risk relative to what can be gained by staying put. The delivery by the state of the promised public good reduces this difference, and there exists a level of resource-sharing that can make peace more attractive than insurrection. Whether the incumbent group chooses or not to use this tool for maintaining peace is now a matter of relative cost. In some plausible cases, the government might choose to maintain only a minimal level of defence, and buy its continuation in power by redistribution. Hence, the possibility to commit credibly to this redistribution policy makes a difference, by providing the option to avoid both the civil war and the « pretorian » regime of peace by deterrence.

Therefore, the inability of the incumbent government to commit credibly to an announced expenditure mix, is the key to the eruption of political violence. A weak government, which is unable to commit credibly, will thus impose too much repression, and not enough redistribution, fuelling too much rebellion activity. This has implications for aid policy: without an extremely careful conditionality, a weak government will use a large share of the aid money, or an equivalent amount, to increase defence expenditures, while a credible one will use the additional resources with a large share devoted to redistribution.

**The Sources of Credibility**

What remains to be explained is what determines the ability of a government to commit credibly or not. In a static framework, this rests on some characteristics of the players, that would be determined endogenously in a repeated game framework, like reputation, or on the emergence of institutions that constrain the rulers to keep their words. Democracy, understood not so much as the existence of an electoral process for selecting the ruler, but as a set of checks and balances for protecting the rights of the minority groups, is certainly a method for achieving this outcome. However, the econometric results by Collier and Hoeffler
(1999) show that democracy, as measured by the Polity III democracy scale, affects the risk of civil war in a quadratic way, with the maximum risk being found at intermediate levels. They interpret this result as showing that a gradual move to democracy, from dictatorship, would put peace at risk. Similarly, Hegre, Ellingsen, Gleditsch and Gates (1999) have found an inverted U-shaped relation between the risk of civil war and democracy. An alternative approach to enhancing the credibility of African states is to rely on donors and conditionality to enforce it. If the expected cost of reneging on its engagements is large enough, in terms of cut aid, and if the donors are really credible, then the donor community could help promote peace by subjecting the public expenditure mix to a type of conditionality that emphasises the public expenditures with a clear redistributive content, as defined here.

3. Ethnic Capital, the Urban Elite, and the Redistributive State

Internal and external migrations have been analysed thoroughly by economists, sociologists, anthropologists, demographers, etc., and respond to various motivations. For example, rural-rural migrations can have an insurance objective: by diversifying the income sources of the kin group, the latter acquires the possibility of smoothing its consumption stream, provided the contingent transfers between the different sub-groups can be relied upon. In West Africa, and in other parts of the continent as well, migration can also be a substitute for the lack of credit, in the early part of a man’s working life. Men have to move to a place where they are unknown, in order to find a job for a wage, if they want to accumulate money for starting a business and founding a family.

However, the most important flow of migrants, in a development perspective, is the flow between the rural and the urban sector. Urbanisation is parts and parcel with the development process, and is involved both in the process of industrialisation, and in the process of state formation. The formal sector, including both the government sector and the enterprises of the formal sector, be they private or publicly owned, attracts a lot of the most educated migrants. These sectors pay the highest and most stable wages and salaries available in African countries, so that getting a job in them provides the kin group with some significant
insurance services. However, this kind of jobs require usually a sizeable level of human capital. Therefore, kin groups and villages in Africa often invest collectively in the education of some of their young members, with a view to send them to the city for getting a formal sector job, with a strong preference for a job in government or in public enterprises. Conversely, the restrictions on the access to education of large fractions of the population, as may happen in times of budgetary restraint, or under dictatorial rules, are perceived by some social groups as a process of exclusion from the benefits of the modern sector.

**A Federation of Ethnic Groups**

This creates the typical African organisation of the society, where the state bureaucracy and the political elite is composed of people from most of the different ethnic groups of the country, who play the part of ‘delegates’. This federation of ‘delegates’ from the different regions of the country creates among them some new links of solidarity.

The African state is thus constructed, or should be so, as a means for federating the different ethnic groups, via a coalition of its elites, and thus entails two inter-linked redistribution systems. There is first a system of transfers within the ethnic or kin groups, whereby the rich migrants, who owe their human capital to some initial investment by their group, are supposed to remit a large part of their incomes back to the village, often on a contingent basis, as a way to absorb some exogenous shocks. There is next a system of redistribution between the ethnic groups, through their elite, or via the government budget. While the state raises some funds by taxing the economy, in a more or less transparent way, it is supposed to share the benefits of these resources with the people. When the benefits of public expenditures are broadly distributed, the ‘delegates’ of the ethnic groups can, most of the time, obtain a renewed support to the state from their folks.

**Exclusion and Rebellion**

The ethnic redistribution system is usually a well enforced mechanism, founded on the initial endowment of ethnic capital, which ensures compliance with the rules of the game. Nevertheless, the study of some recent African conflicts provides some examples of
insurrection that were triggered by the discontent of the ethnic base with the fallout from the participation of their elite to the state game.

A first instance is provided by the Tuareg movement in Mali and Niger in the early 1990s. Although this rebellion has been often presented as an ethnic problem between the Tuaregs and the other groups of Mali and Niger, a closer scrutiny shows that an important reason for this fighting was the discontent of the young jobless Tuaregs with their tribal rulers. The *Ishumar* were former soldiers from the Libyan army, that colonel Khadafi had to fire when the oil money started to dry out. When returning to their homeland, these young Tuaregs realised that there were no opportunity for them, in particular because of the poor education that they had received, and the very poor infrastructure invested in their region by the Malian or Nigerien governments. Then, the north witnessed an insurrection, which was directed as much against the feudal leaders as against the Malian and Nigerien states. Another example of breakdown of the redistribution system within the ethnic framework is provided by the insurgency in Sierra Leone in the early 1990s, described by Abdullah and Muana (1998) as a revolt of the lumpen-proletariat. Without any ethnic support, nor any national program, the Revolutionary United Front, formed from the underclass of Freetown and the illegal diamond miners, turned into a sort of bandit movement, committing atrocities against the people from any groups. These examples illustrate the fact that the ethnic group can fail to provide the required link between its members and the higher levels of the state.

Most of the time, a violent insurgency arises when one or several ethnic groups are excluded from the sharing of the state bounty. The insurgent groups are very much a reflection of the structure of the ethnic groups described above: the analysis of recent guerrillas shows that most insurgent groups are led by the most educated members, and that the loyalty that they get from their followers depends on their ability to secure and redistribute resources within the group. Then, absent foreign support, which is more difficult to mobilise in the post-Cold War period, the looting of alien groups is the only solution left. Among others, Pool (1998) for the Eritrean People’s Liberation Front, and Young (1998), for the Tigray People’s
Liberation Front, illustrate how the educated elite members have organised the distribution of resources among their supporters.

The analysis of recent conflicts suggests that the exclusion of some threatening groups from the sharing of the resources of the state is made more likely when the country relies on mineral exports than when it relies on agricultural exports. The history of the Biafra war in Nigeria in the late 1960 is the archetype of such a war. This is a case where one ethnic group was trying to exclude the other two main groups from the ‘loot-sharing’ game. The civil wars in Angola and in the Democratic Republic of Congo provide other examples.

**The Political Economy of High Public Sector Wages**

Among the methods used by African governments to maintain peace, high public sector wages play an important part. In the present framework, high public sector wages and salaries fuel a large flow of remittances between the members of the urban elite group and their fellow ethnic-group members, in order to buy some support from them. Some suggestive evidence is provided by the negative effect on the probability of political violence of CFA Zone membership (the ‘CFA Zone exception’) found above, from Azam, Berthélemy and Calipel (1996). It seems that the main relevant impact of membership in the CFA Zone has been to entail much higher wages and salaries in the public sector than in other African countries, relative to income per capita.

This suggests that high public sector wages, provided representatives from most groups are involved, are associated with a more peaceful society. A historical study of Burkina Faso and of Mali (Azam et al., 1999) suggests that rulers use increases in public sector salaries as a means to buy loyalty and political support, when they feel that their position in power becomes shakier. The different governments of Burkina Faso have alternated between a phase of moderation of the wages and salaries of the civil servants, with high provision of public goods, at the beginning of their stay in power, and a phase of low provision of public goods, associated with rising wages and salaries of civil servants, at a later
stage. The reign of General Moussa Traoré of Mali displays the same pattern, but at a much slower pace.

4. Conclusion

This line of analysis has very clear implications for aid policy. First of all, it shows that the latter must avoid by any means to undermine the process of state formation. Second, it suggests that political conditionality should emphasise checks and balances, the defence of the rights of minorities, etc., and not necessarily multi-party elections, which might lead to the exclusion of large parts of the people from political participation, proportional representation, which cuts representatives from direct popular control, and other formal institutions imported from the north. Conversely, it suggests that ‘demonising’ traditional institutions, that form the cement of most African societies, must be avoided, and the development capacities of the ethnic communities should be used, while African states are slowly groping toward their modernised forms. Lastly, it suggests that the trade-off between high wages in the public sector and the resulting under-provision of public goods must be handled with care, taking due account of the needs to purchase popular support for the state.

References:


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