

AFRICA AT THE TURN OF THE CENTURY: STATE FAILURE?

Peter van der Windt

When Things Fell Apart: State Failure in Late-Century Africa

Robert H. Bates

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Despite the optimism after independence and the end of the Cold War, violence and political disorder became widespread in Africa at the end of the 20th century. Why is this the case? This is the question that Robert Bates, a Harvard University professor and a prominent scholar of Africa, sets out to answer in *When Things Fell Apart*.

This concise book consists of four parts. In part one, Bates argues that governments can use coercion to either protect or prey upon their citizens. Whether a government chooses to be a guardian or a warlord depends on three factors: public revenues, the government's valuation of the future and the benefits from predation. According to Bates, events at the end of the 20th century negatively altered both governments' public revenues and their valuations of the future. First, predation became a more attractive option when the energy crisis of the 1980s led to a crisis in public revenues for many African governments. Second, the wave of democratization following the end of the Cold War threatened incumbent governments in Africa. Faced with potentially shorter political horizons, predation became a more attractive option for Africa's leaders. Finally, most African states have rich (and lootable) natural resources, making predation an attractive option.

In part two of *When Things Fell Apart*, Bates argues that the seeds of African political disorder were sown several decades ago. Soon after independence, Africa's political institutions became increasingly monopolized by military and single party regimes. Rather than distributing benefits widely, these authoritarian regimes operated on the logic of exclusion, resulting in political opportunism and economic inequality. Also, following independence many Africa governments implemented so-called control regimes: economic policies that generated benefits for political elites at the expense of the larger population. Finally, Bates emphasizes that demographic growth, territorial expansion and competing claims to land generated tremendous domestic tension in African states.

In part three, Bates discusses how the drift towards authoritarianism and subsequent implementation of control regimes influenced public revenues and governments' valuation of the future. These events also made African governments vulnerable to the two sharp external shocks at the end of the 20th century. When coupled with latent domestic tensions and abundant natural resources, these

factors led increasingly to both state predation and collapse.

When Things Fell Apart brings the state back to the center of discussion in the literature on political disorder. Bates convincingly argues that, if we want to understand the political disorder that became widespread in Africa at the end of the 20th century, we have to understand the factors that lead states to break down.

Despite Bates' strong arguments, the book suffers from a number of weaknesses. *When Things Fell Apart* is too short for the enormity of the task that Bates sets for himself. For example, the influence of the three key explanatory variables of political disorder—public revenues, the government's valuation of the future and the benefits of predation—are each discussed in only one page. A more elaborate discussion would have been valuable. For instance, part one of *When Things Fell Apart* argues that resources make it more likely for governments to prey, and therefore for states to collapse, because "these resources pose a constant temptation to those with military power." But in part three, Bates claims that "states whose economies have been richly endowed are no more likely to fail than are others." Clearly more work is needed to understand the underlying causal mechanisms of natural resources and state collapse.

When Things Fell Apart is an analysis based upon statistical evidence presented in the appendix, which is part four of the book. The dataset is large and spans forty-six African countries over twenty-six years. In a key regression, Bates regresses the probability of experiencing political disorder on public revenues, resources (a proxy measure for the benefits of predation) and a one- or no-party system (a proxy variable for the governments' valuation of the future). Political disorder itself is instrumented by a binary variable of the presence of an armed militia.

This analysis poses two problems. First, while finding a good instrument can be hard, the binary variable selected is questionable. For example, it fails to capture the difference between small and large militias—which arguably have different consequences for political disorder. Second, the statistical results show that it is difficult to reconcile the exposition with the data. For example, in the aforementioned regression, not all the independent variables of interest yield statistically significant relations. Another illustration of the tension between the main text and the statistical analysis in the appendix is the influence of the type of government on the imposition of control regimes. While in part two Bates states that "military governments were far more likely than civilian ones to adopt control regimes," the regressions in part four do not provide statistically robust support for this hypothesis.

When Things Fell Apart presents a pessimistic picture of the African continent. But has Africa truly fallen apart over the course of the last decades? Bates claims this to be the case by pointing to the number of African civil wars. Indeed, at the

end of the period under investigation, ten civil wars were raging in Africa, of which eight started at the end of the 20th century. However, these figures only include twenty of the fifty-three African states. In addition, the end of the period under investigation is 1995. Many of these wars have since ended; Liberia and Sierra Leone being prominent examples. It is up to future scholars to account for this new turn of events. 