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INSURGENT MOVEMENTS
IN AFRICA

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Since the 1990s, insurgencies in African states such as Sierra Leone, Liberia, Congo, Somalia and Sudan have attracted attention from scholars and policy-makers as evidence of a new generation of warfare. Rather than fighting to replace existing states with more efficient alternatives, insurgents in these wars disrupt political order and hollow out states rather than fighting to replace or reform them. Their leaderships often lack cohesion. Their styles of fighting reflect this fragmented structure, an amalgam of ethnic militias, local gangs, defecting army units and criminal bands. They advertise no core ideology or comprehensive political programmes. In a marked contrast to Africa’s Maoist-style anti-colonial and anti-apartheid insurgents of the 1960s to the 1980s that devoted great effort to set up liberated zones and to mobilize and administer populations, these new insurgents neither claim that they represent large segments of the population nor put significant effort into seeking popular support for their objectives. Their actions are geared instead towards protecting and enriching their own members, usually at the expense of the security and material well-being of the people among whom they fight.

Paul Collier explains how the combination of weak state institutions and a dearth of economic opportunities set the stage for insurgents that develop as a kind of criminal enterprise that serves the personal material interests of its members. Insurgent leaders in this context have little option but to appeal to the self-interest of recruits and tolerate uses of violence – looting, for example – that appear to be undisciplined and counterproductive in the Maoist version of insurgency. This kind of insurgent organization overwhelms potential leaders who attend to political organizing instead of prioritizing the quest for income to attract fighters and to buy weapons (Collier 2000). Support from the Diaspora and neighbouring states that use insurgents as proxies to meddle in affairs beyond their borders provides ready sources of income to self-interested insurgents. This external support protects insurgents from consequences of using violence in ways that impoverish people and make them less secure (Collier and Hoeffler 2004). Mary Kaldor explains that this shift in the nature of insurgents follows global economic and political changes producing a ‘revolution in the social relations of warfare’ (Kaldor 2001: 3). In her analysis, the criminal gangs, paramilitaries, mercenaries and other disparate groups that feature in these wars use violence to control new sources of income linked to changes in the global political economy such as skimming humanitarian aid and illicit trafficking of commodities such as drugs, diamonds and timber.
These analytical approaches provide valuable insights into how and why insurgents in Africa behave as they do and why broad ideological and political programmes and population-centric strategies remain as unrealized possibilities. They show how the weakening of state institutions and the associated ascendency in relative terms of illicit and criminal economic opportunities drives insurgent behaviour. Given that these trends have been most severe in Africa, insurgencies there operate in a political environment that promotes fragmented organizations, an overriding interest in personal economic gain among fighters, and the exercise of violence in ways that make non-combatants more insecure.

The problem with this formulation is that it does not fit the facts. A survey of insurgencies in Africa uncovers a high degree of simultaneity in organizational behaviour. At the dawn of the twenty-first century, factionalized collections of gangs, militias and renegade army units fought in Congo, Sierra Leone and Liberia while the Sudan People’s Liberation Army held and administered substantial ‘liberated zones’ in southern Sudan under the leadership of a disciplined Leninist-style centralized command. Somalia exhibited a diversity of insurgent organizations, ranging from armed groups that turned to piracy, to local clan-based militias and to religious groups. One insurgent group, the Somali National Movement, has sustained a government administration in areas that it controls from the early 1990s, and has declared an independent Republic of Somaliland. Meanwhile, in 2000, disparate gangs in Nigeria fought in the oil-rich Niger Delta sometimes as armed muscle for local politicians and at other times to attack institutions of state authority as they took advantage of business opportunities as extortionists and looters. Tuareg militias in northern Mali and Niger fought for greater self-determination, while in 1998, a small, disciplined group of al-Qaeda operatives carried out coordinated simultaneous attacks on US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania.

In sum, Africa’s contemporary and historic insurgencies demonstrate a wide range of organizational forms and strategies. The next two sections contain the central argument that explains why Africa’s insurgencies assume these various forms. The section that follows examines opposite ends of the spectrum of recent and ongoing insurgencies in Africa; the hierarchical bureaucratic Maoist variant and the decentralized amalgamations that resemble diverse collections of armed gangs. The final section considers the future of insurgency in Africa.

The mainsprings of Maoist-style insurgencies

The organization of insurgencies often mirrors the organization of the states that they fight. For example, as the anti-colonial insurgencies of the 1960s fought to create a new kind of politics, they adopted many of the organizational features of the colonial states that were their targets as they set up their ‘liberated zones’. These administrations were meant to give substance to insurgent promises to improve and reorient the bureaucracies of the state that they were about to inherit. This was true even when insurgents engaged in asymmetrical battles, attacking state authority through sabotage, while guerrilla forces infiltrated communities in efforts to displace the central authorities and set themselves up as a rival government. The struggle to form a new government required that insurgents focus on non-combatant populations to shape their perceptions and mobilize them in support of the insurgent cause in the model of classic twentieth-century Maoist insurgencies. Mao’s admonition that the ‘richest source of power to wage war lies in the masses of the people’ (quoted in Rejai 1969: 250) appeared in insurgent rhetoric and strategies during Africa’s anti-colonial struggles of the 1960s and 1970s. This ‘people’s war’, the mobilization of non-combatant populations, also marked the anti-apartheid insurgencies in Southern Africa to 1990. Anti-government insurgents in Ethiopia in the 1980s fought a self-styled revolutionary regime, taking up the problems of local people and interpreting them in
ways that advanced the insurgents’ ideological agenda, an emphasis on self-reliance and careful attention to administering ‘liberated zones’ in preparation for protracted military struggle against the regime (Young 1997: 32–5).

These population-centric strategies and broad ideological frameworks required careful coordination of operations to ensure that disciplined insurgent fighters would use violence in a discriminating fashion geared towards maintaining popular support as much as to engage state forces in battle. This struggle with the state to control territory and to govern people thus played a central role in Maoist insurgent strategies, necessitating constant attention to indoctrinating and controlling fighters, exercising violence carefully, and building and sustaining bureaucracies. Political leadership played a central role in coordinating these strategies and to recognize and navigate around the constraints and opportunities that their situations presented.

Mid-twentieth-century insurgents and the regimes that they fought shared modernist ideals about the nature of state authority. They agreed that states should mobilize and order society to promote economic transformation. Insurgents and state officials alike tried to figure out new ways to boost the capacity of their organizations to accomplish these tasks. Post-Second World War colonial Africa’s model farms and villages, extensive rural conservation efforts, and the rapid expansion of infrastructure and services exemplified these aspirations of state power. The elaborate five-year plans of Portuguese colonial officials in the 1960s, for example, included provisions to construct the world’s fourth largest dam in Mozambique to generate electricity for huge agricultural projects and to support state-designed industrial development plans (Radmann 1974: 47). The Frente de Libertação de Moçambique (FRELIMO), Mozambique’s principal anti-colonial insurgency that was founded in 1962 considered this project as a menacing demonstration of Portuguese power and intent of their colonialist foes to bring more settlers to their colony. Yet upon assuming power in 1975, the successful insurgents incorporated this project in their own five-year plan, modifying the agricultural development portion to reflect what they saw as the positive lessons of the Chinese and Tanzanian agrarian policies to promote rural development and adjusting the industrial component to reflect their emphasis on autonomous development (Gesnekter 1975: 25).

James Scott identified the ultimate incapacity of this high modernist project to break free of the improvisations and illicit acts of the people whose behaviour they were expected to change. He argued that these deviations from rules and procedures took place in realms of social autonomy that exist beyond the capacity of bureaucracies to easily control. Especially in rural areas where even the most capable state bureaucracies could not dominate entrenched local community practices, insurgent forces oriented towards ‘people’s war’ benefited from venues and local personal networks from which they could educate potential recruits, draw followers, and mobilize supporters and their resources to oppose state power. Insurgents took advantage of some of the same personal networks that helped individuals to evade state efforts to tax and regulate economic transactions. The irony was that bureaucrats often had to tolerate this incompleteness of control. Even in the Soviet Union, Scott noted, planners put up with clandestine exchanges between state enterprises and formally proscribed activities such as private garden plots and other improvisations as necessary compromises that were critical to making the rest of the system work (Scott 1998: 309–41).

Other social spaces such as university classrooms – venues to debate and experiment with ideas – also can provide arenas beyond the close scrutiny of bureaucratic state administration. Historically the bulk of the leadership of Africa’s Maoist-style insurgencies and their guerrilla armies was drawn from universities. These leaders, highly unrepresentative of the people they later led in battle and tried to administer, took advantage of the limited reach of the state into the classroom and student groups to tap into commercial networks to collect and control the
flow of the resources that they needed to recruit fighters and to pursue their political strategies. The greater the social autonomy of these spaces the more leeway for would-be insurgent leaders to improvise and experiment with organizational strategies and political programmes. Insurgent leaders such as Amilcar Cabral, Eduardo Mondlane and Yoweri Museveni wrote about the lessons of their missteps in disciplining fighters and in warding off or co-opting criminal and bandit groups while they were pursuing academic and professional careers (see for example: Handyside 1969; Mondlane 1969; Museveni 1997). Appearing less frequently in their public writings were the harsh adjustments that involved the suppression of critics and the bloody struggles to eliminate rival factions. Ironically, bureaucratic institutions in Africa, seen in development literature as ‘strong’ alternatives to patronage-based regime strategies, created the social conditions for ideologically-driven insurgents to organize and experiment. The clear division between public and private realms and the inherent limits of purely bureaucratic approaches to the exercise of state authority – the ideal of the modern vision of the state – also provided the context for insurgent leaders to theorize about and then recruit and organize their followers as a counter-state.

State officials historically have been inclined to suppress ethnic militias and criminals and other armed groups in favour of an exclusive state-provided order. But the counterinsurgency strategies of some states have included these groups when officials were confident that these would remain under the guidance of the state and not threaten its control (Cann 1997; Ellis 1999). The limits of this counterinsurgency strategy lay in official concerns that ceding state authority to these armed groups would undermine the capacity of these states to exercise bureaucratic control over their own populations. Those African states with the greatest bureaucratic capacity to conduct surveillance and apply coercion, most notably South Africa, did use proxy militias and gave free reign to special units (Ellis 1998) but state forces in these instances relied primarily on police and regular military forces to prevent insurgents from establishing liberated zones.

Insurgencies that have appeared in the world’s most bureaucratic states beyond Africa’s shores also illustrate this relationship between the nature of state authority and the organization of insurgencies. Germany’s Red Army Faction wrote of the challenges that they faced in the late 1960s: ‘The degree to which the political police can monitor these groups, their meetings, their appointments, and the contents of their discussions is already so extensive that one has to stay away if one wants to escape this surveillance’ (Red Army Faction n.d.). As in South Africa where the African National Congress and other insurgent groups faced formidable state agencies, creating very small, tight-knit and secretive vanguard organizations offered a way to avoid harsh countermeasures. Urban guerrillas in Latin America encountered similar problems, and considered assaults, raids, the infiltration of demonstrations to provoke police to shoot protestors, and other forms of ‘armed propaganda’ such as kidnapping, hijackings and bank robberies as alternatives where intensive state control ruled out mass-based insurgencies (Marighella 2002). These insurgents observed, as did counterparts across Portuguese Africa and in the apartheid regimes and in a few other places, that university classrooms and student study groups were among the safest places to discuss ideas with like-minded people and to recruit cadres while minimizing interference from the state.

Insurgents in Africa have mirrored these global patterns of insurgent organizational response to the nature of state authority. Africa’s states with the deepest historical experiences with bureaucratic administrations – the Portuguese colonies, the apartheid regimes of Southern Africa, Rwanda and Ethiopia, produced classic Maoist-style insurgents whose leaders originated in universities and who went on to recruit guerrilla armies among rural communities. Their strategies devoted attention to building ‘liberated zones’ and mounting ‘people’s wars’ to
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challenge regimes and mobilize the population in a new vision of the future. These mass-based Maoist insurgencies have arisen in contexts where state authorities do not control major elements of everyday life in rural areas. Mid-century bureaucratic colonial states in Africa fit into this category of state–insurgent relations, with insurgents first gaining purchase in peripheral rural areas and later encircling cities. Africa’s most urbanized and bureaucratized states, particularly the apartheid regimes of South Africa and Namibia in the 1970s and 1980s, forced insurgents to incorporate the tactics that looked more like the urban guerrilla. But even these insurgents tried to mobilize populations and envisioned carving out their own liberated zones on enemy territory.

More generally, it is not surprising in this light that urban insurgencies throughout the world since industrial societies and dense bureaucratic states started appearing in the late nineteenth century have taken the form of anarchist and ultra-radical cells, and more recently, dispersed networked terrorist cells. Basque separatists, the Baader-Meinhof gang, the Red Army Faction and more recent organizations such as the Greek group, Conspiracy of Cells of Fire that specializes in sending mail bombs to European leaders, and the transnational groups responsible for the 9/11 attacks on New York and Washington adapt the organizational models of the insurgents of the twenty-first century that challenge bureaucratically capable states. But as societies urbanize and rapid economic development in many countries translates into state administrations that are able to conduct intensive surveillance of the movements and transactions of their populations, such capacities are not developing in this direction in a significant portion of Africa, with important consequences for the organization of insurgencies there.

The mainsprings of network-centric insurgencies

The most noteworthy contrast to Maoist guerrillas that fight bureaucratic regimes appears in Africa’s most thoroughly non-bureaucratic states. These are the states in which regimes have exercised authority through the manipulation of patronage rather than through building capable bureaucracies. Insurgencies that appear in these states copy this organizational strategy in their own efforts to exercise political authority. In this fight for political power, the insurgents target the patronage networks that are the foundation of regime power. Since these regimes do not put a great deal of effort into actually governing citizens, such as providing them with protection and social services, insurgents face no great need to try to out-govern the regime in a struggle to wrest control of the people as a precondition to rule. This environment, however, presents its own hazards. Insurgent leaders who struggle to infiltrate and control the patronage networks upon which the regime bases its power become highly vulnerable to co-optation. If they successfully resist this danger, they still face the demands of their new clients to tend to the highly parochial demands of ethnic or sectarian interests around which individual state officials often organize the populations that they represent.

These conditions present insurgent ideologues and commanders with serious challenges in coordinating an organizational focus on broad political visions and programmes. These insurgents arise in contexts where regimes have maintained control through allowing key members of patronage networks to field their own armed groups that they are permitted to use for personal agendas, such as exploiting illicit economic opportunities, provided that these armed groups are used to defend regime power when needed. This is partly a regime response to the scarcity of revenues. Unable to build bureaucracies as vehicles of patronage to knit together diverse populations, many rulers of threadbare states opted instead to permit their supporters to exploit other people who enjoyed lesser levels of political favour. While this strategy for asserting authority gives incentives to clients and would-be clients to compete to demonstrate
support for a central patron, it is also compatible with mobilizing and arming groups and individuals to pursue their private agendas. For example, a politician’s ‘political muscle’ can prey upon neighbouring communities in the course of claiming to protect one’s own. Security forces and even local toughs associated with politicians can set up roadblocks to collect money from travellers while enjoying the protection of (and providing kickbacks to) their superiors. This decentralization and privatization of violence has become a serious problem in places like Kenya and Nigeria where the introduction of competitive elections has intensified the struggle for position within these patronage networks, such that Kenya’s own government investigators reported that politicians regularly cultivate ties with armed gangs for mutual interest (Republic of Kenya 2008).^3^3^3

Insurgencies in this kind of environment have to compete with established armed groups for recruits. Would-be insurgent fighters can use this competition to demand that insurgents also cater to their short-term personal interests, such as through tolerating looting, lest these recruits decide to join another group. This initial inability of insurgents to control the flow of resources, even in small areas, denies them the leeway to experiment with political ideas and indoctrinate and discipline recruits. Such insurgents usually prove to be as fragmented and uncoordinated as the various army factions, militias and politicians’ personal gangs that are associated with the regimes that they fight. These wars exhibit the character of what Kalyvas calls ‘symmetric irregular warfare’, much like multi-sided gang warfare (Kalyvas 2006: 67–8).

At first glance, these states with exceedingly weak bureaucracies, particularly in rural areas, should be easy targets for Maoist-style insurgents. A reflection of this incapacity, the American journal Foreign Policy lists ten African countries as ‘critical’ in its 2010 failed states index. This feeble institutional capacity is usually coupled with displays of regime failure in the form of minimal service delivery that generate widespread vocal popular expressions of disgust at misrule. Taken together, this condition may seem to provide fertile ground for insurgent ideologues to promote compelling political narratives of rebellion and renewal and set up ‘liberated zones’ with fairly little interference. This vision motivates fears in foreign capitals that such ‘ungoverned spaces’ will become refuges for violent insurgents to promote religious extremism and opposition to the West while exploiting the bureaucratic incapacities of states to plan and launch well-coordinated attacks (Rabasa et al. 2007).

The reality is that states with feeble bureaucracies often have regimes that pursue stability and assert their authority through patronage networks, as noted above. These strategies of control are often socially intrusive. Such regimes focus on controlling people through manipulating their access to economic opportunities and incorporating these people into vertical patronage networks that are organized around politically reliable local strongmen that act as intermediaries between officials in the capital and the bulk of the population that remain beyond the reach of state agencies. These intermediaries often come from a wide array of backgrounds, often exercising authority in their own right in some other sphere, such as in local religious institutions or markets. These regimes cultivate this influence in as many social venues as possible, such as in NGOs, student groups, ethnic associations and other networks that are conventionally associated with ‘civil society’. Though not part of the formal institutional design of the state, these social venues often play important roles in the political networks of regimes. This control can extend to regime domination of illicit markets through manipulating law enforcement to exempt political favourites from prosecution. Zaire’s former president, Joseph Mobutu, summarized how this system of authority worked in his country: ‘Everything is for sale, everything is bought in our country. In this traffic, holding any slice of public power constitutes a veritable exchange instrument, convertible into illicit acquisition of money and other goods’ (Lemarchand 1979: 248).
This system of authority inhibits cooperation between groups in society. Competition for leadership within these groups often becomes intertwined with struggles over individual and group standing in this wider regime-centric political network, which reinforces tendencies towards factional and even personal conflicts within these groups. The practical effect is that this political activity invades the otherwise autonomous spaces in which people who may hate this kind of regime and the economic hardship and insecurity that it produces could otherwise organize to challenge the regime. This organizational fragmentation means that surprisingly little coercion on the part of state officials is needed to isolate and destroy truly radical challenges and limit the field of manoeuvre for popular critics.5

Taken as a whole, this kind of politics has insulated the African continent from durable anti-regime political movements, even though popular activism played a significant role in the advent of political reforms in the early 1990s. The continent is notable in recent decades for the scarcity of radical reformist movements that arise to challenge incumbent regimes. When such regimes are swept from power, it is at the hands of their own agents at the elite levels of these political networks. The focus of competition for political power thus occurs within this framework, even when the capacity of the top echelon in the capital to manage these affairs falters. Thus succession crises and internal competition and not insurgencies are the real challenges facing these regimes. Local intermediaries continue to control access to economic opportunities—in licit and illicit commerce, through the allocations of public offices for private gain, the regulation of ‘private’ associations such as NGOs, ethnic and religious associations and so forth—and maintain dominant positions in their home communities, even after the political centre collapses. The ‘resource wars’ that are thought in some quarters to drive conflicts in Africa actually reflect these competitions between different branches of political networks. Instead of the population-centric Maoist ‘people’s wars’, these conflicts are network-centric competitions for control over the resources needed to maintain personal domination over patronage networks. Close scrutiny of these conflicts usually turns up ideologues of the old fashioned type. But these people cannot rise to prominence when they are shut out of access to resources that they need to recruit followers and generate popular support. They cannot find social venues in which to organize followers, even if their messages find resonance in people’s political attitudes and opinions.

This form of political control shapes the nature of the recruitment of insurgents. Hatred of political figures that are widely seen as beneficiaries of unwarranted privilege may be widespread. At the same time individuals may feel compelled to join the hated politician’s militia to gain access to resources and protection from other predators. This dynamic is familiar to students of mafias. Blok, for example, explained how Mafiosi in Sicily employed criminals and poor peasants to use violence to control the public arena on behalf of local aristocrats. State officials who could not control communities directly sought out these ‘violent entrepreneurs’ to help them manage opposition in these societies. This exercise of violence produced profits for those involved, particularly those in the upper reaches of this hierarchy. Thus many poor people, rather than taking up arms against a local aristocracy and a state that presented them with few prospects, made their peace with this organization and sought protection, higher status and income through collaboration with this network (Blok 1974). If political activists had enjoyed greater social autonomy to organize followers, perhaps Sicily would have been the site of a Maoist-style rural insurgency. But such an insurgency was very difficult to organize, even though the Italian state was notable for its weak control over this region.

It is very difficult to compel fighters to consistently discriminate in their uses of violence in network-centric warfare. The proliferation of armed groups gives fighters opportunities other than the insurgent organization to pursue their personal interests, often under the protection of incumbent political insiders. Fighters who apply violence arbitrarily against non-combatants, for
example, can escape punishment if they shift their support to a political militia or join some other political gang that rewards violent self-interested behaviour. This capacity to shift from one group to another gives individual fighters the capacity to pursue short-term interests and needs, some of which are consistent with the aims of the leaders of surviving branches of the incumbent political network. Population-centric Maoist-style insurgency thus becomes very difficult when insurgents cannot convince populations that they can protect and administer these people, even if the insurgents wanted to set up such ‘liberated zones’.

Incumbent political notables who mobilize impoverished young people do not suffer political harm if their fighters attack local non-combatants, since it is the resources associated with the fragmenting political network that are the targets of their struggles. From the perspective of Maoist ‘people’s war’, these conflicts appear to focus on spoiling and disrupting political order. But that perspective reflects the old insurgency warfare focus on the state, whereas these network-centric conflicts in contemporary Africa mirror the pre-conflict regime strategies of authority. It is this domestic political context, particularly regime strategies for asserting political authority, that shapes the organization and behaviour of many insurgent groups in Africa, a development that is examined in more detail immediately below.

The evidence

Nearly all of Africa’s Maoist-style insurgencies began under the direction of ideological leaderships that initiated their struggles in university classrooms. Amilcar Cabral, the leader of the Partido Africano da Independência da Guiné e Cabo Verde (PAIGC) offers a prototypical case. One of a handful of indigenes of Portuguese Guinea who was able to gain access to higher education, he discovered opportunities while at a university in Portugal in the 1950s to discuss political ideas with students from other Portuguese colonies. Even though these students were socially removed from the vast bulk of their own societies, the students were in positions to formulate their own political strategies and link them to political debates that were then going on in Europe. Once Cabral and others returned to their homes, the insurgent leaders made tactical alliances with workers in the expanding formal economy who were socially ambitious or were concerned about salaries and job security, and convinced these people that the anti-colonial struggle would solve these problems.

Portuguese authorities used bureaucratic measures to conduct surveillance of the activists and to suppress challenges to their rule. In Portuguese Guinea, the colonial army had 40,000 troops and access to NATO supplies. But the colonial regime’s rudimentary bureaucracy and alliances with chiefs and businessman still could not control the entirety of that small country’s territory and its population. The PAIGC was able to gain control over commerce in agricultural goods in regions that it operated. This was because the PAIGC could co-opt local notables who had enough local autonomy to be able to switch sides without too much immediate fear of punishment. In this colonial milieu, local youth did not yet owe allegiance to politician militias or the youth wings of patronage-based political parties. Therefore, local notables could still impose direct discipline on how these insurgent recruits used violence in their home communities. Insurgents that could make use of this effective form of social control enjoyed the leeway to experiment and to adjust strategies from the doctrinaire framework that they devised in the rarified atmosphere of the university and cafes. Modifying esoteric political theories was essential to the insurgent capacity to convince people that a broad anti-colonial political narrative could address parochial concerns (Dhada 1998: 572). ‘Remember always that the people do not fight for ideas, for things that only exist in the heads of individuals’ wrote Cabral. ‘The people fight and they accept sacrifices. But they do it in order to gain material advantages, to live in peace, and to improve their lives, to experience progress’ (quote from Henriksen 1976: 381).
This and other colonial regimes had few mechanisms through which to easily mobilize grassroots parochial concerns to counterbalance the insurgents’ appeals. The social isolation of the colonial state, which intensified with the bureaucratic reforms of the 1950s and 1960s in Portuguese Guinea left the PAIGC insurgents freedom to coordinate local agendas. This merging of the insurgents’ broad political ideology and programme with local traditions of periodic resistance to authority succeeded in directing what James Scott called the ‘revolution in the revolution’ towards the construction of a new political order (Scott 1979). This process of insurgent indoctrination and control also resembles what David Kilcullen later called the ‘accidental guerilla syndrome’ in which insurgents convince local armed groups that external threats are really responsible for their problems and that the insurgents are their defenders (Kilcullen 2009: 34–8). Since the ideological perspectives of student ideologues held little intrinsic appeal among most people, the insurgents also had to build relationships with communities through shared business interests, personal social connections, and through the selective intimidation of those who resisted their domination. These strategies of insurgent control enlisted local notables who pined to regain the authority that they had lost as a result of colonial administrative reforms and others who resented the actions of the state, and extended to people who simply reacted negatively to the impact that outside ideas and social changes had on local values and mores. Cabral was especially adept at this process, having met many local notables in his capacity as an agronomy researcher for the United Nations prior to leading an insurgency. This occupation gave him an opportunity to learn about local problems and to build personal connections.

This social insulation from the regime and state gave the insurgents the capacity to compel fighters to be discriminate in their uses of violence. The capacity to discipline fighters with the help of local authorities made possible the creation of insurgent-run ‘liberated zones’. By September 1973, PAIGC leaders concluded that they had liberated enough of the country – about 80 per cent – to make a unilateral declaration of independence and to convince a growing number of governments to recognize them as the rightful rulers of their country.

Anti-colonial insurgency followed a similar trajectory in Mozambique through the 1960s. FRELIMO leader Eduardo Mondlane used his position as a UN research officer on trust territories to meet anti-colonial activists in Mozambique and to develop personal connections to local community leaders and educated nationalists, much as Cabral had used his UN connection. This kind of social autonomy appeared in later insurgencies too. Yoweri Museveni wrote of how his days as a student (1967–70) at the University of Dar es Salaam had shaped his political strategies and gave him access to the recruits to launch an insurgency in Uganda 1981 that succeeded in taking power in 1986 after an extensive experience running liberated zones and mobilizing local populations. ‘It is Dar es Salaam’s atmosphere of freedom fighters, socialists, nationalists, and anti-imperialism’, wrote the young Museveni, ‘that attracted me rather than the so-called “academicians” of the University College, Dar es Salaam’. The core of Museveni’s National Resistance Army (NRA) included 26 other educated men, among them a law graduate of the University of Dar es Salaam, a fine arts graduate from Makerere University, a student of veterinary medicine, several school teachers, and a number of students who had joined another insurgent group before being absorbed into the NRA (Amaza 1998: 234–41).

Insurgents closer to the present illustrate this link between the capacity to organize population-centric strategies, maintain internal discipline and discriminate uses of violence, and access to socially sheltered environments. The decision of the UN’s High Commission for Refugees to provide Rwandan refugees with separate schools – often better than those that Ugandan citizens attended – and scholarships gave some refugees the education that they needed to emigrate to wealthier countries from which they provided support to the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) in the early 1990s. At least as important was the RPF leadership’s experience in Museveni’s
NRA and from 1986 in the victorious insurgency’s new national army. Top RPF leaders served in Uganda in positions such as the political commissar of the Ugandan army’s infantry school, as assistant director of counterintelligence, Head of the School of Political Education, and several as high staff members in the Directorate of Military Intelligence (Mushemeza 2007: 113–15). These positions were ideal for giving the insurgent leaders opportunities to recruit and organize followers in an environment where the insurgents could contain other influences on recruits.

All of these population-centric insurgencies faced state regimes that tried to divide insurgent forces through exploiting the ethnic and other social differences of their leaders and their recruits. Strategies include using militias to control communities beyond the limited capacities of regular armies to occupy. These strategies met with some success. Efforts to infiltrate insurgent groups sowed suspicion within them and led to self-destructive searches for enemy collaborators. For the most part, however, these states relied on formal bureaucratic instruments of coercion such as police forces, armies and intelligence agencies to battle the insurgents. With the exception of South Africa where formidable bureaucratic capacity precluded the formation of liberated zones, none of the states that faced insurgents who emphasized population-centric ‘people’s wars’ were able to prevail militarily over their foes.

The argument here is that these state forces could not prevail because the bureaucratic character of their authority permitted the social spaces in which ideologically oriented population-centric insurgents could organize and survive long enough to develop effective strategies. The more bureaucratic the nature of state authority, the more likely it was that ideologues would prevail among organizers and that the insurgencies that they led would pursue a Maoist ‘people’s war’ strategy of mobilization (provided that bureaucratic control was not overwhelming). Regimes that relied upon patronage networks to assert their authority also undermine the social basis for the development of Maoist insurgencies. Thus regimes that are commonly thought of as weak from the perspective of conventional notions of state capacity do a good job of resisting the efforts of reformist and revolutionary groups to overthrow them. They more commonly succumb, however, to the divisions and succession crises that are internal to these regimes.

Liberia’s war during the 1990s provides a prototypical portrait of the network-centric warfare in the context of patronage-based regime strategies. Charles Taylor, the leader of the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL), the main insurgent faction, occupied an important position in the patronage networks of the regime that he sought to replace. He had served from 1981 to 1983 as the Director of General Services, the regime’s overseas procurement agency, which gave him access to government purchasing contract procedures. Taylor received this position and the benefits of corruption that were associated with it because of his role as a student leader in the 1970s and his close connections to a popular military commander. Taylor’s participation in politics, even as he exploited his office for personal gain, demonstrated to would-be opponents that critics were easily co-opted. The Liberian regime’s decision to prosecute Taylor for corruption in 1983 also showed that the regime could punish its clients. Though Taylor was in the United States, the Liberian government invoked an extradition treaty to have Taylor returned to Liberia. But Taylor escaped from a Massachusetts prison in 1985 where he had been detained pending his extradition and fled to Africa.

Taylor’s organizational efforts focused on members of the incumbent regime and to others who were connected to the regime’s patronage resource networks. These included a former foreign minister and attorney-general, both of whom became close Taylor associates in the 1990s. Taylor also grafted foreign business networks to his insurgent coalition, and a finance minister from the old regime became Taylor’s ‘economic advisor’. He also received the backing of the president of neighbouring Côte d’Ivoire, whose son-in-law was killed by the previous Liberian regime when it seized power in 1980.
All of these ties marked Taylor and his associates as political insiders. Liberia was not without ideologues who envisioned a population-centric insurgent strategy. Some of these were even attracted to Taylor’s NPFL. But such people were dangerous to Taylor as their popularity threatened his position as the leader of the NPFL. Subsequently, many of these people either died under mysterious circumstances or fled from the conflict. Taylor instead based his authority on satisfying the self-interest of NPFL recruits, as his network-centric strategy did not require developing close ties with local communities to mobilize popular support. Even the NPFL’s American lobbyists painted a picture of minimal administrative efforts when they visited NPFL-held territory. ‘The Taylor forces are not paid—they are all volunteers. Basically they live off the land’, they reported (Hyman and Goldfield 1991: 4). Taylor’s own agents recorded popular complaints of ‘commanders and their subordinates in the habit of harassing and brutalizing peaceful citizens’ (NPRAG 1992: 7). Government courts did not function, teachers went unpaid, and insecurity and poverty provoked the flight abroad of over a half a million people from NPFL-held territory, about one-third of the population, and the displacement of another third to areas of Liberia beyond the NPFL’s control (Human Rights Watch 1994).

Self-interest, which plays a role in recruitment in all wars, was particularly evident in this conflict. A post-war survey of fighters found that about 35 per cent cited the need to protect their families as their primary reason for joining the NPFL. About 20 per cent said that they joined because they were scared to do otherwise, and about 18 per cent reported that they were abducted. Many reported that they received incentives such as money, food and jobs to join the NPFL (Pugel 2007: 36). These motivations would remain dominant driving forces for fighters in the absence of political commissars and cadres responsible for indoctrinating these recruits. The absence of these figures and the inability and lack of political will of the NPFL’s leaders to develop deeper ties with local notables denied the NPFL the tools to discipline recruits to use violence in a more discriminating fashion. But the network-centric goals of this insurgency did not require such extensive and politically risky measures. This was true on all sides of this conflict, and thus the recruits of other factions, including those in government-aligned militias and the state’s own armed forces were organized and behaved much like the insurgents that they fought. These political networks had crowded out and destroyed many of the social spaces that ideologues and others otherwise would have used to develop their alternative strategies for fighting.

Liberia’s experience reflected trends around the continent. By the 1980s, economic problems associated with patronage-based strategies of rule and institutional decay had hit universities especially hard. During the 1990s, about 20,000 academic staff emigrated from the continent each year, with 10,000 from Nigeria employed in the United States alone at mid-decade (Jumare 1997: 113). World Bank researchers estimated that at the start of the twenty-first century, one-third of Africa’s professionals had departed. In an extreme case, every doctor in one graduating class at the University of Zimbabwe left the country (Brown 2002: 20). In countries like Nigeria, armed youths started appearing on university campuses to interfere in student politics. Many observers suspected that such gangs were affiliated with politicians and were deployed to disrupt anti-regime organizing. To the extent that universities were prime sources of leadership for Africa’s population-centric insurgencies, these changes closed off the venues that previously favoured ideologues. Even political activists willing to take advantage of electoral reform encountered regime-laid obstacles. In Congo (Zaire), Mobutu agreed to multi-party elections. At the same time he sponsored ‘opposition’ parties among his clients in an effort to fragment the political terrain and crowd out popular opposition movements. By 1991, over 200 parties were registered, and by 1993, there were 380 parties on the scene (Ngoy-Kangoy 1995: 27–54).
These regime strategies used disorder as a political instrument, much as the insurgents that fought them used disorder in their efforts to seize power (Chabal and Daloz 1999). This crowding out of political space has created what Ernest Wamba-dia-Wamba (himself a former leader of the Kisangani faction of the Rassemblement Congolais pour la Démocratie as well as the former President of the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa) recognized as a ‘crisis of ideology’ that left in its place a violent politics that presented enormous obstacles to those who tried to organize population-centric insurgencies around alternative political visions (Wamba dia Wamba 1998).

The future of insurgency in Africa

The central claim of this argument is that the organization and behaviour of insurgencies reflect the strategies that regimes use to exercise political authority. The nature of these strategies has significant consequences for shaping the nature of social spaces, and in particular, the degrees of social autonomy that are available to insurgent leaders. Just as the urbanization in economically developed societies with dense state surveillance and regulation of interactions reduces the opportunities to create rural-based Maoist-style insurgencies, significant parts of the African continent demonstrate their own distinctive category of state–insurgent relations. These regimes that preside over institutionally weak states in Africa often prove to be remarkably adept at using their political networks – the real sinews of political authority – as a sort of counterinsurgency strategy to undermine organized opposition. This does not protect these regimes from all threats; it simply shifts the focus of those threats to ambitious political actors who challenge regimes from within their own networks. Maintaining the stability of these elite coalitions and managing succession crises stand as their biggest challenges. But even when these political networks collapse into competing armed factions, ideological insurgents still encounter tremendous organizational obstacles.

Consideration of these influential factors helps to shed light on possible future forms of insurgency in Africa. One possibility is that state regimes continue to exercise authority through patronage networks and abjure or downplay serious efforts to create strong bureaucracies. Another possibility is that state regimes in Africa undergo significant reform, boosting their bureaucratic capacities in efforts to increase revenues and seek popular legitimacy on the basis of service provision and economic performance. In fact, both trajectories are possible, and would be associated with different categories of insurgencies.

The first category, fragmented network-centric insurgencies that abjure efforts to administer ‘liberated zones’ and that employ indiscriminate violence against non-combatants, would be associated with regimes that rely on patronage networks to exercise authority. Electoral politics in some countries from the 1990s appears to have intensified the scramble among politicians in these networks once competitive elections offered the possibility of claiming more status and power. Congo-Brazzaville’s elections in the 1990s offered a paradigmatic example of conflict in a patronage-based regime. Politicians turned to armed supporters and helped to field militias in violent campaigns. Groups such as the Cobras, Ninjas and Zoulous dominated the 1992 and 1997 elections. Elections in Nigeria have exhibited a similar propensity to generate violence as politicians compete to control patronage resources (Human Rights Watch 2007). Political leaders in Congo-Brazzaville have done away with truly competitive elections, and thus have restored a measure of stability to their patronage-based political system. Nigeria, however, continues to exhibit the connection between competition in patronage systems and armed struggle to control associated resources. Kenya, noted above, and Côte d’Ivoire show similar connections between elections and violence. Consequently, these states have not seen the appearance
of insurgents with autonomous political agendas, even though many citizens express a deep disdain for the status quo and occasionally radical ideas are articulated in popular media and circulate even more widely in music lyrics and rumours.

It is possible that the extremes of violent competition in this kind of political context, particularly after the regimes that once centralized the control of access to patronage resources collapse, could undergo a transformation. Most of Somalia, lacking a centralized state since 1991, and Congo, having largely collapsed by the mid 1990s, now contain young adults who have no personal experience of living in a state. It is doubtful that these young people would be socialized into the world of political competition in the same way that their elders were in the context of presidents who could still more or less regulate the distribution of patronage across their nations. The interstices of highly decentralized competing networks may offer those who reject this politics a new space to organize their own ideologically-driven insurgencies and mobilize followers. These insurgents would need a broadly accessible narrative to cut across parochial divisions. They would also need access to resources that were beyond the reach of incumbent politicians and militia leaders. Though narratives may be available, possibly in the form of millenarian visions, religious extremism or reactions against sinister global forces, resources would be much harder to secure, particularly if insurgents wanted to avoid compromising themselves in agreements with incumbent politicians.

A second broad category of future insurgency might appear where successes in international and domestic efforts to build the capacities of administrative institutions in Africa unintentionally open new social spaces for ideologues to organize armed opposition. If reform is supposed to trim the reach of political networks and end rent-seeking behaviour among officials and regime insiders, the invigorated ‘civil society’ that arises may include ideologically-driven regime opponents. One can imagine that the anonymity of a commercial sector or religious institutions that are truly autonomous from the dense networks of patronage politics and factional struggle would present more favourable environments for ideologues. Unlike many Northern economies, commerce in Africa is still largely conducted through physical exchanges of currency, which would further insulate insurgent leaders from state surveillance in their collection of resources if these wider political changes were to occur.

It is possible that reformers will take advantage of technological advances to increase state surveillance and hinder the organizational efforts of ideologues. Ethiopia’s government, for example, has presided over economic and administrative policies that have resulted in the doubling of the country’s economy in the decade from 2000. That government also has promoted electronic transfers of funds, even for very poor people in an effort to collect revenues. Obtaining SIM cards requires the presentation of identity papers, and transmission towers go off-line when political challenges appear. The country’s status as a frontline state in the War on Terror has resulted in international aid to upgrade computer databases containing information about the movements of citizens and foreigners, tighten border surveillance capabilities, and more careful screening of international transactions. These measures would force ideological, population-centric insurgents to adopt some of the same measures as urban guerrillas outside of Africa; that is, the insurgents would have to become more secretive and commit highly visible violent acts to announce their presence to the people and demonstrate lapses of government control.

This survey does not exhaust future possibilities. The appearance of violent drugs gangs in Mexico that displaces the state in their core areas of operation signal the development of new kinds of insurgents that combine the control of resource networks with occasional efforts to administer populations, even though these groups do not fight to overthrow the current regime. It is conceivable that the operators of illicit networks in Africa could attain a similar degree of
autonomy from the old political establishment that previously protected them. Extensive urban slums, despite their physical proximity to state power, might see armed political groups attain the upper hand vis-à-vis their politician patrons. If this occurred, insurgent violence might take on some of the character of violence in Mexico.

In all of these scenarios, the future of insurgencies in Africa would mirror changes in the strategies of incumbent regimes to assert their authority. Seen more broadly, particular kinds of insurgencies would be associated with particular kinds of regimes. As it is likely that Africa’s politics will continue to change, so too will Africa’s insurgencies continue their evolution.

Notes
1 This is demonstrated well in Kai Thaler, ‘Revolutionary Restraint: Marxism–Leninism and Violence Against Civilians in Mozambique and Angola’, Yale University, Program on Order, Conflict and Violence, 2009. Available at: www.yale.edu/macmillan/ocvprogram/papers/ThalerRevolutionaryRestraint.pdf.
2 This idea of the symmetry of state and insurgent forces appears in Kalyvas (2007).
3 On political violence in Nigeria, see Human Rights Watch (2008).
5 This idea is developed in Bayart (2009: 180–204).
6 On Mondlane’s connections and background see Kitchen (1967).
7 Yoweri Museveni, ‘My Three Years in Tanzania’, mimeo, n.d. I am grateful to a former NRA fighter who gave me a copy of this in Kampala in June 2001.
8 On the origins of one of these militias, see Ossebi (1998).

Recommended readings

References
Insurgent movements in Africa


