African Guerrillas: Raging Against the Machine

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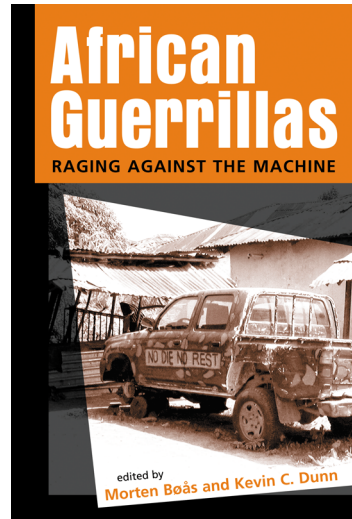
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Introduction

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Guerrilla movements occupy the center stage of violent conflict in sub-Saharan Africa. With the changing international geopolitical environment and further institutional decay of the African state, many African nations are currently facing armed insurgencies. However, it is not the scope of African guerrilla movements that makes them a significant subject for study—African civil wars are far from ubiquitous, despite popular Western imaginations to the contrary. Rather, it is the distinctive character of contemporary African guerrilla movements that seemingly challenges accepted assumptions about the motivations, manifestations, and character of armed conflict and makes them an important object for investigations and scholarly inquiry. There will be no development without security, and until sustainable solutions to the many conflicts on the African continent are identified and implemented, the quest, often externally imposed, will remain elusive.

Such solutions will appear only when the nature of these conflicts and the movements who fight them are recognized. Currently, both mainstream academia and its manifestations in policy interventions tend to be characterized by single-factor explanations that offer little possibility in this regard.[1] We are particularly worried about the dominance of what we call greed-based approaches to African conflicts, as they tell us little about the true nature of such conflicts. Treating African guerrillas as devoid of any kind of political agenda, greed-based approaches present them as bandits. Such an interpretation significantly narrows the number of possible policy interventions: you can negotiate with armed rebels with a political agenda, but bandits are to be crushed by force. We hope that the more nuanced and historically grounded studies presented in this volume will contribute to a more sober debate about the causes of conflict in Africa, the motivations of armed insurgents, and how various stakeholders can deal with these wars. Thus this volume is intended to be of use to both scholars and policymakers,

particularly those interested in developing a more holistic understanding of contemporary armed struggles in Africa, and perhaps elsewhere.

Armed Insurgencies

African guerrilla movements are not a new phenomenon. Numerous African states have experienced armed nationalist struggles for independence and/or postindependence civil wars. During much of the twentieth century, these conflicts were often fueled by the Cold War as the United States and the Soviet Union treated Africa as part of their zero-sum global geopolitical competition. In the years since the collapse of the Soviet Union, several Cold War–era civil wars either have collapsed or have been resolved by diplomatic initiatives. In the first category, the long-running war in Angola came to a close with the death of União Nacional para Independência Total de Angola (UNITA) leader Jonas Savimbi in 2002. Other Cold War–fueled struggles, like that in Mozambique, reached their resolution through elaborate political negotiations. In those cases, the end of the Cold War meant that the superpower lifelines that kept the conflict alive quickly dried up, making a continuation of the struggle extremely problematic for the parties involved. Yet in other cases, long-running conflicts on the continent are entering their second or even third decade. These tend to be struggles that were peripheral to the Cold War conflict, receiving relatively little attention from either the Soviet Union or the United States. For example, northern Uganda has the unfortunate distinction of suffering almost twenty uninterrupted years of armed conflict between the forces of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) and the central government.

The years since the Cold War's end have also seen the creation of two relatively new fully developed regional conflict zones. The first has been caused by the intertwining of a series of localized conflicts in Western Africa, primarily around the Mano River basin (see Richards 1996; Huband 1998; Ellis 1999; Adebajo and Rashid 2004; Bøås 2001, 2005). Countries drawn into this conflict zone include Liberia, Sierra Leone, Côte d'Ivoire, and Guinea. The second conflict zone was created in Central Africa with the collapse of the Mobutist state in Zaire, now the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC; see Mamdani 2001; Clark 2002; Dunn 2003; Bøås 2004a). As in West Africa, various localized conflicts became intertwined with the development of a regional war zone that drew in numerous countries, including Angola, Burundi, Chad, Rwanda, Namibia, Sudan, Uganda, and Zimbabwe.[2]

Armed insurgents have become an increasingly significant element of African politics given the end of the Cold War, the international geopolitical reorganization, the crises of the African neopatrimonial state, and the emergence of two fully developed conflict zones. Yet careful analysis of

such movements has been an exception, be it for a lack of concise information,[3] the difficulties linked to fieldwork in conflict-ridden countries, scholarly indifference, or the deeply rooted tradition of state-centered analysis in political science. Christopher Clapham's 1998 collection *African Guerrillas* is still the only attempt to study African insurgencies in a comparative manner. Since the publication of *African Guerrillas,* the external and internal environments of African insurgencies have changed dramatically. Even Côte d'Ivoire, once the purported cornerstone of stability in West Africa, has effectively been divided into two by civil war. The long list of countries affected by insurgencies since the publication of Clapham's collection includes Liberia, where the combined pressure of the Liberians United for Democracy and Reconciliation (LURD) and the Movement for Democracy in Liberia (MODEL), together with significant external pressure, forced Charles Taylor to seek exile in Nigeria in August 2003. Since 1998, the war in the DRC has been a protracted conflict of considerable proportions, involving at least six foreign armies, two major insurgencies, half a dozen smaller movements, and a plethora of militias. In Sudan, as international efforts tried to end the war between Khartoum and the southern parts of the country, insurgencies and counterinsurgencies raised the specter of a new civil war with ramifications far beyond the Darfur region. If anything, the importance of African insurgencies both for scholarly study and for policy interventions is increasing rather than decreasing.

This volume is an attempt to revisit and discuss the insights provided by Clapham's groundbreaking *African Guerrillas,* while building upon that earlier work to substantially advance the field of inquiry. In Clapham's book four broad categories of African insurgencies are developed: liberation insurgencies (such as the anticolonial nationalist movements), separatist insurgencies (such as the Eritrean People's Liberation Front), reform insurgencies (such as Yoweri Museveni's National Resistance Army in Uganda), and warlord insurgencies (such as Charles Taylor's National Patriotic Front of Liberia [NPFL] and Foday Sankoh's Revolutionary United Front [RUF] in Sierra Leone; Clapham 1998b: 6–7). While we continue to find Clapham's typology useful, we believe the debate needs to be revisited and developed further in the light of significant changes both on the ground and in the scholarly field. For example, only the last of these four categories has been very prominent in recent debates. This is primarily because, with few exceptions, the majority of insurgencies do not easily fit into the other categories and new modes of useful understanding have yet to be developed. As we discuss in Chapter 2, much of the recent literature on insurgencies has mistakenly focused on single-factor explanations, such as greed, resources, and culture. In this volume, we argue for a more nuanced, holistic approach that is historically grounded and integrates multiple levels of analysis, from the local and national to the regional and global.

It is our belief that African insurgencies are best understood as rational responses to the composition of African states and their polities. In his edited collection *No Peace, No War,* anthropologist Paul Richards observes, "War is a long-term struggle organized for political ends, commonly but not always using violence" (2005b: 4). In many ways, this restates Clapham's earlier argument that "insurgencies derive basically from blocked political aspirations, and in some cases also from reactive desperation" (1998b: 5). Like Clapham, Richards stresses the importance of an ethnographic approach to understanding conflict. However, Richards differs from Clapham by reconceptualizing conflict as part of a continuum: "We do ethnography of war best, we will argue, not by imposing a sharp categorical distinction between 'war' and 'peace,' but by thinking in terms of a continuum" in which both cooperative and conflictive behavior shapes the dispute (2005a: 5). As Richards argues, "War only makes sense as an aspect of social process. The best analytical approach to war as process is through the ethnography of the actual practices of war and peace" (2005b: 12).

We find this an important contribution to the field, and we are disappointed by the failure of mainstream political science and international relations to take these insights seriously. In his engagement with Richards's volume, Jason Strakes questions its ability to "inform mainstream conflict studies in international relations" because "the underlying theme of the book (the skepticism of the contributors towards generalizability as an academic goal) puts it in a difficult position vis-à-vis contemporary political scientists and IR specialists" (2005: 477). We find this a damning critique not of Richards's work but of the state of "mainstream" conflict studies. It is our hope that our book—in which several contemporary political scientists and IR specialists share many of Richards's insights and examine political variables within a holistic, historically grounded approach—will provide a useful antidote to the insular, positivist-dominated field of US political science.

The Structure of the Book

This book is organized into thematic essays and country-specific case studies. The thematic essays draw together chapters examining overarching themes of the book. In Chapter 2, we explore the political agendas of African guerrillas, with specific emphasis on the internal dynamics and external contexts that are informing contemporary armed struggles. It is our contention that in order to grasp what the wars are all about, we must concern ourselves with questions regarding the composition of African states and their respective polities. The background of these wars is deeply embedded in the history of the continent, and not only in the colonial past or the transformation

to independence but in the totality of African history. The chapter examines various motivations for contemporary African insurgencies, including ideology, grievances against the central government, regional and social marginalization, elite desires to capture state power, the crisis of the postcolonial state, and the extreme politicizing of autochthony debates. We also examine the external context of insurgency groups in Africa, noting the changes brought by the end of the Cold War and the global "war on terror," as well as important changes in international and regional markets. This chapter therefore promotes an understanding of African insurgency movements as both creations of and responses to the crisis of modernity and its dysfunctional institutions in Africa. Far from behaving like "classic" insurgencies such as the Ethiopian and the Eritrean ones, most of the current rebel groups seem more like manifestations of rage against the "machinery" of dysfunctional states, their equally fragmented and corrupted institutions, and the uneven impact of a globalized modernity.

In Chapter 3, Morten Bøås contextualizes the issue of marginalized youth in African insurgency movements. Africa is a continent of youth, and those who fight are mostly young men. Young African fighters are often depicted as ruthless murderers or powerless victims. Both views oversimplify by failing to account for the nature of war. War does more than merely disrupt or destroy existing social systems; it also creates new systems. Although cruel, ugly, and inhuman, war is also by nature an instrument for social restructuring. It is a site for innovation, reordering social, economic, and political life, and is best approached as a drama. War is a social drama over the distribution of ideas, identities, resources, and social positions, and it often forces the disadvantaged to design alternative survival strategies. When youth are drawn into the center stage of such conflicts, the outcome is often the emergence of militias and other types of insurgency movements. In societies torn by conflict, these entities can provide some sort of order and social organization and can represent means of social integration and upward social mobility. The only way to understand youth involvement in such processes is to take their experiences seriously, even if the narrative presented by such youthful dramas does not fit well with existing categories for understanding political behavior.

In the final thematic chapter (Chapter 4), Pierre Englebert explores the reasons behind the low number of secessionist movements in Africa. As he points out, Latin America alone has a lower propensity for separatism than Africa. Englebert offers elements for a theory of the reproduction of failed postcolonial states in Africa; he focuses on the extent to which institutions of sovereignty provide political and material resources for elites and populations at large, outweighing the potential benefits of separatist nonsovereign alternatives.

The bulk of this collection is made up of country-specific case studies. We have chosen a wide range of case studies, with the majority from the

newly developed regional conflict zones of West Africa (Liberia and Côte d'Ivoire) and the Great Lakes region of Central Africa (Democratic Republic of Congo, Uganda, and Sudan). The two exceptions are Senegal and Angola. The first is included because of its arguable uniqueness—a secessionist movement with little external support and a poorly developed "war economy." In the case of Angola's UNITA, its lengthy history illustrates the multiple changes from the Cold War era of "traditional" armed insurgents to the contemporary era. Indeed, UNITA arguably represents a case of an insurgency that, despite its longevity and multiple mutations, was eventually unsuccessful in transforming itself to ensure its survival in the current context.

The first two case studies come from the regional conflict zone of West Africa. In Chapter 5, William Reno provides an examination of LURD, one of the most important factions in the second part of the Liberian civil war (i.e., 1998–2003), and draws out the differences and similarities between that group and Charles Taylor's NPFL, the group LURD eventually drove from power. One of the main differences Reno notes is that LURD faced a much more constrained regional political context than NPFL did and, as a result, LURD was more reliant on foreign politicians who had become adept at using Liberian groups to serve their own agendas. Reno argues that the politics of collapsed states operate according to a definable logic, one that is becoming more regional in its definition as individual states grow weaker and some collapse.

In Chapter 6, Richard Banégas and Ruth Marshall-Fratani seek to unravel the complex character of the ongoing armed conflict in Côte d'Ivoire. Rejecting arguments that the conflict is fueled by economic motivations or state failure, Banégas and Marshall-Fratani assert that the conflict is primarily political, with the local and international intertwined, generating a war about borders in which nation-states play a central role. Above all, the authors maintain that the conflict is a "war of modernity" focused essentially on questions of nationality and citizenship, informed by a violent nativist ideology of autochthony that is popular among the marginalized and the youth in the southern part of the country.

Turning to Central Africa, Denis Tull's chapter (Chapter 7) explores the politics of insurgency in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, focusing mainly on the Rassemblement Congolais pour la Démocratie (RCD), the insurgency movement that, in alliance with Rwanda, triggered the second war in the DRC (1998–2003). Tull argues that given Rwanda's controlling role and changes in the international environment, the RCD lacked effective ownership of the insurgent war and was forced to privilege the quest for international recognition as a legitimate contender for Congolese state power at the expense of domestic political support—let alone legitimacy— within its host society in the Kivus. Tull considers how the failure of the

RCD to achieve local legitimacy has thwarted attempts to establish a long-term peace in eastern DRC.

Chapter 8 offers an examination of northern Uganda's LRA, evaluating several theories that seek to explain the long-running conflict from a number of angles. Rejecting the thesis that Joseph Kony and his LRA are irrational madmen, Kevin Dunn explores the local dynamics that informed the rise of the LRA and its immediate predecessors and notes the complex evolution of the war, as a localized conflict that became increasingly regionalized and institutionalized.

In Chapter 9, Øystein Rolandsen examines the recent history of government militias in Sudan, primarily the Janjawiid, the counterinsurgent militias largely blamed for the catastrophic violence in the Darfur region. Rolandsen provides a historical narrative of the conflict in Darfur, drawing out its local and regional dimensions and noting the government's use of militias as counterinsurgency tools. The chapter explores the composition and objectives of the Janjawiid, and Rolandsen argues that the use of militias by Khartoum is not new; what makes Darfur unique is the scale of the militia attacks and the level of international attention the Darfur conflict has received.

In Chapter 10, Vincent Foucher examines the motivations, character, and evolution of the Mouvement des Forces Démocratiques de Casamance (MFDC), which has been fighting since the 1980s for the independence of Casamance, the southern district of Senegal. Foucher notes that, unlike many other contemporary insurgencies, the MFDC started not as a military enterprise but as a civil society protest movement. Though it has progressively evolved, Foucher argues that the MFDC is unique among the violent sectarian movements and war-oriented movements elsewhere in the continent, given its poorly developed "war economy" and weak external support structures. Foucher argues that it is this weakness and the nature and transformations of its interactions with the local populations and with the Senegalese state that explains the resilience of the MFDC.

In the final case study (Chapter 11), Assis Malaquias examines the evolution of Angola's UNITA, an armed guerrilla group that began in 1966 but virtually imploded after the death of its leader Jonas Savimbi in 2002. Throughout most of its history, UNITA dealt with several major crises by successfully reinventing itself and adapting to the new circumstances. Malaquias maintains that the very flexibility that enabled UNITA to survive major life-threatening challenges imbued it with an exaggerated sense of confidence that, in turn, led the movement to eventually make important strategic miscalculations. Malaquias argues that UNITA's decision to fund its struggle by controlling diamond networks transformed the group from a peasant-based insurgency group into a semiconventional army, which ultimately led to its defeat.

The collection ends with a new essay by Christopher Clapham, in which he reviews the changes that have taken place since the publication of *African Guerrillas* in 1998 in light of the arguments and case studies in this book. In this concluding chapter, Clapham examines how guerrilla groups in each of the four categories of his typology evolved and mutated between 1996 and 2006.

Notes

1. A prime example is the work of former World Bank chief economist Paul Collier. See Collier 2000 and Collier and Hoeffler 1998.

2. In late December 2005, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) handed down a judgment on the case brought by the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) against Uganda. In the case, the DRC accused Uganda of violating its sovereignty and of massive human rights abuses, including murder, looting, and destruction. Uganda, on the other hand, claimed that its actions were only meant to protect national security along its borders. In its ruling, the ICJ said that Uganda was wrong to invade the DRC and ruled that the amount of $10 billion was appropriate compensation (see BBC 2005).

3. Important exceptions include Richards 1996, 2005a, 2005b; Abdullah 1998; Peters and Richards 1998; Utas 2003; and Kastfelt 2005.