

Book Review

Africa Spectrum

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Bah, Abu Bakarr and Emmanuel Nikolas (2024), *International Statebuilding in West Africa: Civil Wars and New Humanitarianism in Sierra Leone, Liberia, and Côte d'Ivoire*, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, ISBN 978-0-253-07064-7 (e-Book)

The building of functional states in Africa remains a challenge, this we know. The continent has experienced numerous civil wars in the post-colonial era, often driven by societal divisions and ethnic grievances. However, Bah and Emmanuel argue that these civil conflicts are not the fundamental issues facing the African state but rather symptoms of a deeper problem of statehood.

The introductory chapter (1) tells us that the book examines statebuilding in Africa, focusing on the cases of Sierra Leone, Liberia, and Côte d'Ivoire. It explores the interconnections between civil war and statebuilding, analyses international statebuilding efforts, and addresses the pivotal question of “how a multi-ethnic post-colonial war-torn country can be transformed into a peaceful and democratic state.” To investigate this, Bah and Emmanuel adopt a qualitative research design that combines a comparative-historical approach with expert interviews.

The chapter also sheds light on what statebuilding has looked like in Africa, noting that it has been fragmented and hindered by conflicting objectives. Reflecting on the statebuilding trajectories of Sierra Leone, Liberia, and Côte d'Ivoire, the authors state that although these countries experienced different colonial histories, they faced similar challenges, that is the state was a foreign political and economic entity that was imposed on the natives. As such, it failed to cultivate the shared national identity needed to transform a state into a nation. The authors effectively centre the state as the primary issue in Africa, observing that insufficient analysis of the state has hindered understanding of the conditions in Africa. This underscores the importance of studying the relationship between civil wars and the transformation of the state.

Following the captivating introduction, Chapter 2 unpacks the concept of state decay and outlines in detail what happened in Sierra Leone, Liberia, and Côte d'Ivoire. According to Bah and Emmanuel, research on Africa highlights not only the political and economic challenges as the fundamental problems of the African state, but also the structural and leadership issues, though not framed as state decay. However, for Bah and Emmanuel, the structural and leadership issues are the persistent problems that lead to progressive state deterioration. Against this backdrop, state decay in the three countries resulted from domestic political structures and failed political leadership



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and its enduring effects, which led to civil wars culminating in state collapse. Consequently, addressing these issues and rebuilding these states required substantial international intervention.

In Chapter 3, Bah and Emmanuel delve into humanitarian intervention, namely “new humanitarianism,” which takes an openly political stance by advocating for human rights and democracy, expanding its scope beyond traditional peacekeeping and relief efforts to include peacebuilding and tackling the underlying causes of conflict. Through this lens, they reflect on international interventions in the three case studies, noting that while the international community achieved some successes, resolving the conflicts was a protracted process mainly because the thinking was that elections would end the conflict. This led to multiparty elections being the focus of the peace process, while the root causes of the civil war were neglected, and in this regard, the peace agreements fell short.

Building on the discussion of humanitarian intervention, Chapter 4 explores international statebuilding as a key practice of new humanitarianism. This approach aims to create functional states in war-torn countries while improving the well-being of their populations. Bah and Emmanuel draw on people-centred liberalism, premised on neo-liberal economic and political reforms and good governance, as a framework for statebuilding and development programmes. They suggest that people-centred liberalism has potential to change new humanitarianism from peacebuilding to positive peace, and although it has yielded some promising results, it is an expensive project, highly dependent on support and financing from the international community.

Chapter 5 examines postwar institutional reforms, including security sector reforms, justice and human rights initiatives, and governance improvements, all aimed at fostering stability, peace, democracy, and economic development, as necessary conditions for statebuilding. The book analyses international statebuilding efforts in Sierra Leone, Liberia, and Côte d’Ivoire, noting that the outcomes of these programmes varied. For example, Côte d’Ivoire made minimal progress in reforms related to the security sector, justice, and governance due to transitional election challenges and recurring conflict. In the concluding chapter (6), the authors emphasise that while the international community has played a critical role in ending civil wars in these countries, the ongoing challenge lies in consolidating peace by building inclusive, democratic states capable of fostering sustainable peace and development.

As a scholar researching post-conflict statebuilding in Africa, I found this book both compelling and highly relevant. It speaks to what I call the “design” problem of the post-colonial African state and the pressing need to reimagine states that are rooted in African realities while addressing the immediate and long-term needs of their populations. Bah and Emmanuel mention a few times the need for creative postwar institutional design practices, I wished for a deeper exploration of this. While they acknowledge that providing a blueprint for a design is beyond the book’s scope, I believe such a framework would be valuable and essential as a starting point to move beyond rhetorical discourse.

The book convincingly demonstrates that while international interventions in Sierra Leone, Liberia, and Côte d’Ivoire have had some success, they remain inadequate because the root causes of conflict and insecurity have not been fully addressed.

This is a recurring challenge in post-conflict statebuilding across Africa. While the book focuses primarily on international statebuilding, it does not overlook the domestic dimensions of this process. Instead, it highlights how international and domestic efforts are mutually reinforcing. Overall, this book is an insightful contribution to the field, effectively capturing the complexities of post-conflict reconstruction (particularly in multi-ethnic societies) driven by new humanitarianism and people-centred liberalism. This complexity is not unique to Sierra Leone, Liberia, and Côte d'Ivoire but reflects broader challenges faced by other post-colonial, war-torn states in Africa.

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