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Book Review

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Bachmann, Olaf (2024), *Quasi-Armies and State-building in Africa: Towards a Global Understanding of Civil-Military Relations*, Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, London: United Kingdom, ISBN e-book: 978-1-3504-1339-9, 224 pages

State-building remains a central yet largely unfinished project for many post-independence African states. Bachmann frames the manifestation of statehood as "a process that covers all elements necessary to establish a working bureaucratic, let alone democratic, state" (p.2). Central to this is recognising the military's role within different state types as key to evaluating African statehood and military professionalism, since processes of state formation must be understood simultaneously as processes of "military formation."

Chapter 1 introduces the book's core concern: The development of Central African militaries in relation to post-independence state trajectories, focusing on Cameroon, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), and Rwanda. Bachmann sets out the guiding question: "can the African military play a constructive role in building modern and even democratic states?" (p.3–4). To explore this, he engages Samuel Huntington's model of Civil–Military Relations (CMRs), which relies on a clear separation between civilian and military spheres. He notes, however, that in the African context such a separation "is neither part of African military doctrine nor its practice, and nor is it a part of the self-perception of most African soldiers" (p.11). Instead, African CMRs are better interpreted through patron–client frameworks that reflect the broader political culture.

Chapter 2 reviews post-World War II and post-Cold War approaches to democratic state-building to situate African experiences within a wider historical context. Turning specifically to Central Africa, Bachmann argues that "the Central African political culture is shaped by (…) personalized rule and extreme hierarchism, a lack of civic culture and a closed-society condition" (p.36). These traits reinforce elite patronage structures that personalise the state and shape a military apparatus embedded within these networks. As clients of the post-colonial quasi-state, militaries have remained socially detached from civilian populations, functioning more as instruments of regime survival than as protectors of society.

Chapters 3, 4, and 5 analyse the contrasting postcolonial paths of Congo/Zaire/DRC, Cameroon, and Rwanda. Bachmann contends that labelling the Congolese case a "failed state" is misleading, as the state never fully existed and instead reverted to an early phase

of state formation when state-building failed immediately after independence. This weakened the armed forces, leaving them unable to fulfil either their political role as a pillar of the social contract or their core military function. Under Mobutu, personalised rule dominated the army: political purges were common, loyalists were elevated to senior positions, and regional discrimination, particularly against soldiers from the east, limited cohesion. These dynamics entrenched clientelism and fragmentation, contributing to prolonged civil conflict. By the 2000s, Bachmann observes that the DRC remained a quasi-state, "internationally sovereign without internal empirical existence" (p.80).

Cameroon presents a different picture. Its armed forces "have little visibility, enjoy a fair degree of respect from the people, have not been suspected of harbouring political ambitions and are considered relatively more professional than those of most neighbouring countries" (p.85). The country's civilian and military institutions evolved together, shaped significantly by regime continuity and the absence of a pre-colonial statehood model. Yet Cameroon's political culture (rooted, like that of other Central African states, in patronage) has produced a quasi-army deeply enmeshed in networks of corruption and elite influence, lacking operational coherence, occupying an ambiguous position vis-à-vis the population, and intersecting with civilian patronage networks. Military and civilian elites overlap and pursue personal rather than institutional interests, reinforcing Cameroon's status as a neo-patrimonial quasi-state.

Rwanda stands apart from these cases. Bachmann emphasises the country's long history as a strong, centralised state and notes that "that history is characterized by the inseparability of the military from the political order, the former providing the narrative and the effective foundation for the latter" (p.119). Prior to colonialism, Rwanda had undergone premodern stages of state formation, institutionalised through a feudal system in which the unity of state and army was deeply embedded. The military went from serving the interest of a single ethnic group in the First Republic to being subject to patronage and corruption, eroding discipline and professionalism in the Second Republic. Following the 1994 genocide, the reconstituted Rwandan armed forces assumed roles far beyond external defence. They became a key tool for reintegrating former combatants or sympathisers who might otherwise threaten the new political and security order. Up to around 2010, Rwanda's primary political objective was to eliminate the inter-ethnic divisions that had brought the country to catastrophe. All instruments of state power were mobilised to achieve national reconciliation, consolidate direct rule as a core state-building strategy, and modernise the country. The military played an especially significant role during this period, often serving as the only fully effective institution, to this end.

In Chapter 6, Bachmann concludes by comparing the three cases and arguing that each possesses a quasi-army of distinct quality: two that act as obstacles to state-building (Cameroon and the DRC) and one that functions as a vehicle for it (Rwanda). While the Cameroonian and Congolese forces present themselves as professional armies, the Rwanda Defence Force (RDF) represents a distinct form of quasi-army that advances a new understanding of CMRs. However, it remains unclear whether the RDF will transition fully to a Huntingtonian model given its distinctive role in the state-building project.

This book is valuable for its detailed historical analysis and for shedding light on the complex interplay between state-building and military institutions in Central Africa. The Rwandan model is particularly striking, as it shows how a carefully managed political role for the military can enhance state capacity in post-conflict contexts, though inevitably carrying significant political risks. A reflection on the concept of securocratic state-building, which describes Rwanda's post-conflict strategy in which security actors play a dominant role, relying on coercion to safeguard the state and advance the regime's development goals (a strategy that actually reveals how the regimes security preoccupation conflicts with its aspirations for national unity), would have further enriched the analysis of the Rwanda case.

Buyisile Ntaka
Corvinus University of Budapest, Budapest, Hungary

ORCID iD

Buyisile Ntaka https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9298-5382