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COMING IN SEPTEMBER
China and East Asia

CHINA'S "ZERO-COVID" STRATEGY has sealed off most of the country from the world for more than two years. Most recently, Hong Kong was forced to take the same extreme measures after a coronavirus outbreak. Has this extended period of national isolation in the name of public health coincided with a broader, ideologically driven turn inward under the leadership of Xi Jinping? Meanwhile, China's increasingly belligerent posture toward Taiwan has accelerated the consolidation of an independent identity and democratic culture in Taiwan. And Xi's close ties with Vladimir Putin have started to look like a liability as Russia's brutal invasion of Ukraine draws global condemnation. *Current History*'s September issue will cover these trends and more across the region. *Please note, we do not publish June, July, or August issues*. Topics scheduled to appear include:

- **China's Pandemic Hermeticism**
- **The Rise of Taiwanese National Identity**
- **South Korea's Inequality Problem**
- **The Impact of Return Migration in the Philippines**
- **East Timor's Twenty Years of Independence**
- **Okinawa's Quest for Autonomy**
- **How Close Is the Beijing–Moscow Connection?**
- **What Chinese Readers Want**

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CURRENT HISTORY

May 2022 Vol. 121, No. 835

CONTENTS

163 The Anatomy of Ethiopia's Civil War . . . . *Kjetil Tronvoll*
Should Ethiopia be a unified state with a singular national identity, or a multiethnic federation? A set of overlapping center–periphery disputes led to the outbreak of war in late 2020.

170 Chad after Idriss Déby . . . . *Judith Scheele*
The longtime "boss of the Sahel" is gone, leaving behind a country in which the military is one of the few national institutions offering basic services and opportunities for advancement.

177 The Elusive Dream of Democracy, Security, and Well-Being in Mozambique . . . . . *Celso M. Monjane and M. Anne Pitcher*
With the ruling party more entrenched than ever, political insiders dominate the economy. Corruption scandals and a regional insurgency have hindered development.

184 Nairobi's Rise as a Digital Platform Hub . . . . *Prince K. Guma*
In Kenya's capital, digital payment platforms have proliferated, taking unexpected forms. They promise improved public services and distinctly African modes of smart urbanism.

190 Disability Rights and Wrongs in Uganda . . . . *Tyler Zoanni*
In a nation with some of the most progressive disability laws in the world, daily life for disabled people is as challenging as ever. *Ninth in a series on disability rights around the world.*

PERSPECTIVE

196 States of Emergency—The Apartheid Paranoia in South Africa's Lockdown . . . . *Hlonipha Mokoena*
Memories of the past have shaped the responses of many South Africans to the pandemic, from racialized assumptions about contagions to fear of the infrastructures of state control.

BOOKS

199 Fighting for Africa . . . . *Nemata Blyden*
Weaving his family history into accounts of Africa's influence on the world, from Europe to the Americas, a noted journalist calls for recognition of the continent's role in global history.

CURRENT HISTORY

May 2022

"The perennial contested issue involves what 'Ethiopia' is and should contain—in other words, how the state should be configured, and what an Ethiopian identity should comprise and invoke."

The Anatomy of Ethiopia's Civil War

KJETIL TRONVOLL

On the evening of November 3, 2020, Ethiopia once again succumbed to a devastating civil war. The combatants differ over what triggered it. The federal government claims that a surprise attack on its army's bases in the northern region of Tigray by troops loyal to the regional government sparked the war. The Tigray administration asserts that the strike was an act of self-defense in response to an operation launched earlier that day, when federal authorities flew in a group of commandos to arrest the regional leadership. No matter who fired the first shot, the buildup to war had been ongoing for years as the political cohesion of the central government coalition withered. Some international observers have characterized it as the most pre-announced war in recent African history.

The war has engulfed Tigray Regional State (RS) and deeply affected other regional states, including Amhara, Afar, and to some extent Oromia. The destruction of civilian infrastructure, the displacement of millions of civilians, and a politically motivated blockade of the famine-stricken population of Tigray have led the United Nations to characterize the situation as the world's most pressing humanitarian crisis. There are no exact estimates of how many civilians and combatants have perished in the war, but some local sources claim that 50,000 Tigrayan civilians have been killed; others put the number of combatants killed between 100,000 and 200,000. Whatever the actual death toll, the Ethiopian civil war was the world's largest armed conflict in 2021.

A confounding element in the Ethiopian war is the involvement of a host of belligerent parties. The key conflict pits the alliance of the Tigray Defense Force and the Oromo Liberation Army against Ethiopian federal and regional government troops and militias, irregular Amhara militias, and—not least—the Eritrean Defense Forces. Minor resistance movements and local militia or vigilante groups have allied themselves with one or another of the key belligerents, further complicating efforts to analyze the war, attribute responsibility for war crimes and atrocities, or pursue an overall peace process.

To dissect the dynamics of the overall conflict in Ethiopia, it can be read as four separate civil wars conflated in time and space. These wars have diverse political objectives and involve different belligerent parties, anchored in distinct politico-historical narratives. Each conflict concurrently creates intersecting tactical and strategic alliances among the various combatants.

The main conflict is between the *federal government and Tigray*, stemming from their opposing visions of what the Ethiopian polity is and how it should be configured—based on either devolved power and regional political autonomy or centralization. The *Amhara–Tigray* conflict is primarily a territorial war over contested historical homelands. The *Eritrea–Tigray* conflict may be interpreted as a war of hegemonic domination and the continuation of an earlier conflict between two liberation movements currently in power in Asmara and Mekelle, respectively. Finally, the *Oromo–federal government* conflict is over political representation in, and affiliation to, the Ethiopian state.

Ethiopia's tendency to relapse into civil war, as has been observed repeatedly in modern history, is rooted in a complex set of factors arising from its history of statehood, experience of authoritarianism, perceptions of identity, and traditions of

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political culture. The perennial contested issue involves what "Ethiopia" is and should contain—in other words, how the state should be configured, and what an Ethiopian identity should comprise and invoke. These questions have been debated by politicians, revolutionaries, and researchers for decades.

One should obviously be careful not to essentialize the challenges confronting Ethiopia today. It is nevertheless vital to know about the deep and contested history of this ancient polity in order to understand the current political dynamics that are once again pitting its people against each other.

THE TIGRAYAN PATH TO POWER

Tigray is seen by many as the cradle of Ethiopian civilization. It is the site of the ancient Aksum kingdom, the predecessor state of what would become modern Ethiopia. Tigray thus has always been at the core of the evolving Ethiopian polity. Its ruling elites competed with feudal lords from Gondar Shewa and other Amhara-speaking areas to claim the throne as *negus negast*—the "king of kings," emperor of Ethiopia.

The seat of power shifted to the Shewan–Amhara elite at the end of the nineteenth century, followed by a process of centralization of authority during the twentieth century. Tigrayan elites felt marginalized by the imperial court. The reinvigorated modernization and centralization policies implemented by Emperor Haile Selassie I beginning in the early 1940s sparked renewed resistance against the center by the Tigrayan people, manifested in a widespread rebellion (*woyane*) across the region in 1943.

The introduction of higher education and the evolution of the student movement in the 1960s brought about the growth of an intellectual elite articulating deep-rooted sociopolitical grievances through the ideological doctrines of Marxism-Leninism. Representatives of the Tigrayan student body organized politically into what came to be known as the Tigray Peoples' Liberation Front (TPLF) in 1975. They interpreted the problems and contradictions in Ethiopian society as products of the suppression of "nationalities"—the many ethnic groups in the country—by a state reflecting and protecting what were perceived to be the cultural values, historical narratives, and language of one dominant group: the Amhara.

In 1975, just after the overthrow of the emperor and the establishment of the Derg military junta, the TPLF launched an armed struggle against the central government. It was followed by a flurry of other resistance movements. During the rest of the 1970s and into the 1980s, Ethiopia experienced a devastating civil war, as several of these mostly ethnic-based political fronts conducted armed struggles for political autonomy, or even secession, from what they viewed as an "Amharized" state.

After assuming territorial control over Tigray in 1989, the TPLF organized the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), a coalition of ethnic movements including Amhara, Oromo, and southern Ethiopian peoples, to march on Addis Ababa and topple the Derg government. Tigray's "seventeen years of struggle" culminated with the takeover of central power in Ethiopia in 1991. In consultation with the other movements, most notably the Oromo Liberation Front, the EPRDF replaced the unitary state structure with a multinational (or "ethnic") federal system, granting, in theory, full political autonomy to the country's "nations, nationalities, and peoples."

Ethiopia's "forever war" comes back to haunt every generation.

The Ethiopian constitution of 1995 enshrined a devolved federal state model, whereby initially nine member states were defined according to language and ethnic criteria. The multinational federal system was clearly a form of victor's justice. No political representatives arguing for the continuation of the unitary state, or any other alternative federal model, were allowed to participate in political discourse after EPRDF's takeover of power. Despite introducing multiparty democracy and a comprehensive bill of rights, the EPRDF never allowed any political opposition to challenge its grip on power. The strongman Meles Zenawi presided over the coalition government from 1991 until his death in 2012, keeping all opponents at bay.

Although Amhara, Oromo, and southern ethnic parties were constituent members of the EPRDF, the TPLF maintained control of policy development and implementation under the ideological doctrines of "revolutionary democracy" and "democratic centralism." Widespread human rights abuses and manipulation of elections led, beginning in 2014, to waves of large-scale popular protests against the TPLF/EPRDF regime, which the government was unable to quell. The Oromo youth movement

(Qerroo) spearheaded the protests, later joined by the Amhara youth movement (Fano). They called for genuine political representation at the federal and regional levels, regional autonomy, and accountability for human rights abuses and mismanagement including corruption, nepotism, and land-grabbing.

The sustained protests led to disagreements within the EPRDF leadership on how to handle citizens' demands for political reforms and liberalization, pitting the TPLF core against a new Oromo faction, as well as Amhara representatives. The stalemate eventually compelled Hailemariam Desalegn to step down as party chairman and prime minister to facilitate an end to the internal power struggle. This led to the selection of the Oromo candidate Abiy Ahmed as the new EPRDF chairman and prime minister in April 2018.

ABIY'S UNITARY VISION

By apologizing for EPRDF "state terrorism" and human rights abuses and promising a raft of liberal reforms, Abiy immediately became immensely popular across Ethiopia. In his first eight months in power, he initiated a diplomatic dialogue with Eritrea that led to a peace agreement, released thousands of political prisoners, invited exiled opposition leaders and activists to return, and opened space for political pluralism and freedom of expression. These initiatives earned him the Nobel Peace Prize in 2019.

Initially, the TPLF grudgingly accepted losing control of the government coalition. But as the peace process with Eritrea gained momentum during the summer and fall of 2018, Tigrayan representatives in the security, military, and state-owned sectors were being dismissed, while some were arrested and accused of human rights violations and mismanagement. Consequently, an increasingly wary TPLF started to relocate its key officials back to Tigray to concentrate on regional interests, abandoning federal leadership positions. It also began to push back against and obstruct political processes put in motion by the new national government.

Although his elevation to the premiership represented Oromo aspirations for control of the center under the multinational federal system, Abiy soon muted the ethnic discourse of the EPRDF. Instead, he started to emphasize Ethiopian unity and the need to reinvigorate a strong, unified state. Launching the concept of *medemer* ("synergy" or "addition" in Amharic) as a way forward to reunite a divided society, he stressed the need to be proud of *Ethiopiawinet* (Ethiopianness)—an all-embracing national identity. Since he used rhetoric harking back to the country's "glorious past" to explain these concepts, however, the TPLF leadership and other advocates of multinational federalism in Oromia and the south perceived his moves as a drive toward recentralization of power and the restoration of the repressive Amharized state.

On his return to Ethiopia after receiving the Nobel Peace Prize, Abiy abolished the EPRDF coalition, replacing it in December 2019 with the new, unitary Prosperity Party (PP) to carry forward his vision. All EPRDF coalition partners and affiliated parties in the outlying regions were invited to join the new party. The TPLF declined this invitation. TPLF chairman Debretsion Gebremichael declared that the process establishing the new rulling party was illegal. He alleged that long-held policies and norms had been openly violated by Abiy, whom he accused of undermining the federal system and imperiling the constitution. In a press release, Debretsion asserted that the new ruling clique was planning to "finish off" Tigray. "This is what we call betrayal," he asserted. "They didn't only betray us, they have betrayed their people, the poor people; they betrayed the country, and we consider them traitors."

The rupture of political relations between the TPLF and the PP in late 2019 led to the withdrawal of all TPLF members from federal government positions. Attempts to reconcile the two parties were organized by groups of elders, religious leaders, and civil society representatives. But the ideological contradictions between the new PP policy of enhanced national unity and *Ethiopiawinet* and the TPLF's insistence on the multinational federal order and emphasis on ethnic autonomy were too deep to bridge.

Several conflict-triggering events occurred in 2020, including the postponement of national elections and Tigray's decision to conduct separate regional elections by its own fiat. That, in turn, led to the suspension of federal funding for Tigray, which again spurred the two parties to issue dueling statements of denunciation and derecognition in early October 2020. At that point, there was no turning back from an armed confrontation between a centralizing government and a rebellious Tigrayan leadership.

This political trajectory mirrored earlier patterns during the reigns of Haile Selassie and the Derg. On both sides of the conflict were deep-rooted sentiments of politico-cultural entitlement to power, in the form of either self-rule (*woyane*) or state control (*Ethiopiawinet*). This is Ethiopia's "forever war," which comes back to haunt every generation.

AMHARA AMBITIONS

The war on Tigray is ostensibly about political control. The federal government's stated objectives for what started as a "law-enforcement operation" were to arrest the political and military leadership of the regional government and bring the region back under federal control. But from Amhara political actors' standpoint, the war is broadly interpreted as an attempt to regain what they perceive as lost territories. Western and southern parts of Tigray RS have been reclaimed by arms and are currently being brought under Amhara administration and control.

Access to and control of land are essential in any subsistence agricultural society, particularly so in parts of Ethiopia where land has been cultivated for millennia. Life in rural Ethiopia revolves around land: it defines who you are, where you belong, and your status in society. Rural agricultural land is state-owned, and usufruct rights are traditionally allocated based on proven descent from the community.

The multinational federal system was clearly a form of victor's justice.

The administrative borders of provinces have been altered during all regime changes in Ethiopia. They were often used by the central government as a means of divide-and-rule strategies to maintain political control over local nobility and political elites with aspirations of gaining central power. The latest such redesign took place after the EPRDF assumed power in 1991.

In the process of restructuring Ethiopia from a unitary state to a federal model, nine new regional states were created, as specified in the constitution (Article 46.2), on the basis of "settlement patterns, language, identity, and consent of the people." Most of the states were given new ethnic names; only Tigray and Harar had previously existed in name as administrative regions. Before 1991 there was no region called "Amhara," and the Amharic-speaking population was divided between several administrative regions.

The borders of the new regional states crisscrossed those of former regions. None of the ethnic groups were consulted, and no referenda were held to reflect local sentiments of belonging. The Amhara territorial claims to areas currently within the Tigray RS are based on pre-1991 borders demarcating predominantly Amharic-speaking administrative regions.

The new regional state of Tigray gave away territories in the east to the new Afar RS, while incorporating the western areas of Welkait, Tsegede, and the fertile lowland plains of Setit-Humera, at the expense of the former Gondar administrative region. The lowland areas contain the key sesame cash crop belt in Ethiopia, originally inhabited by a mix of Amhara- and Tigrinya-speaking farmers. The demographic composition of this area has shifted over different periods, as a consequence of political edicts or war. After the civil war of the 1970s and '80s, many Tigrayan refugees from Sudan, as well as internally displaced people, settled in this area. At the outbreak of the new war in 2020, a large majority of the population in western Tigray was Tigrinya-speaking.

On the southern border of the new Tigray, the Raya territory was split between Tigray and Amhara. The Raya people inhabiting the area are a distinct ethnic subgroup of the Oromo; many are bilingual in Amharic and Tigrinya. A part of the earlier Raya–Kobo district, which had been administered by the Wollo region, was included in Tigray.

In 2016, protests erupted in western Tigray, organized by the Welkait Amhara Identity Committee (or Welkait Identity and Self-Determination Committee), demanding a return of the zone to the Amhara RS. The protests were quickly quashed by the regional authorities, and the leaders were arrested. After the resignation of Hailemariam Dessalegn as prime minister in February 2018, the committee leaders were released and immediately resumed the campaign to return the Welkeit–Tsegede area to Amhara control. This position was subsequently adopted by the regional ruling party, the Amhara Democratic Party, deepening internal discontent about TPLF domination within the EPRDF coalition. The party subsequently argued for Amhara control of western Tigray during the EPRDF congress in Hawassa in 2018. This was later seen as one of the key triggers for the current war.

In Raya, in south Tigray, a similar committee was established for the Reconstitution of Raya

Identity. The Amharic-speaking Rayas also expressed a wish to return their area to Amhara administration. This movement was likewise stifled by the TPLF.

When the war broke out in November 2020, it became clear that Amhara regional special forces and militia had been preparing for a long time. The offensive in western Tigray was mostly carried out by Amhara forces, motivated by the cause to reclaim the "lost territories" of the three districts of Welkait, Tsegede, and Setit-Humera. In a subsequent commemoration ceremony, the Amhara RS president at the time, Agegnehu Teshager, stated that "the people of Amhara have been liberated and will never return to slavery again." He called for Amhara resettlement of the reclaimed territories, a settlement policy reflecting the age-old Ethiopian adage, "To cultivate the land is to rule the land." The Tigray regional government insists on the withdrawal of all Amhara and Eritrean forces from western Tigray and a return to the status quo ante of territorial borders.

Abiy may not necessarily endorse this territorial realignment by force, but he appears to be in no position to confront the Amhara political elites on the issue, since he is dependent on their support to stay in power. Amhara political activists are also laying claim to territories currently administered by the neighboring regions of Oromo and Benishangul-Gumuz. This could expand the territorial civil war dynamic in the future.

ERITREAN PAYBACK

The two key resistance fronts against the Derg military junta during the 1970s and '80s, the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) and the TPLF, had a troubled relationship for years, even before each group claimed power, in Eritrea and Ethiopia respectively, following the fall of the junta in 1991. The EPLF was the oldest and the largest movement during the struggle, but when the TPLF took control of a country twenty times larger than newly independent Eritrea, EPLF and its leader Isaias Afwerki were soon dwarfed on the international scene by Meles Zenawi and the TPLF/EPRDF. The leadership of both fronts hailed from the same Tigrinya-speaking highland populations, which are divided by the Ethiopia–Eritrea border. The cultural intimacy between them made their ideological differences even more fierce.

The gradually declining economic and political relationship between the two countries resulted in a new war in 1998, when Eritrean forces seized a strip of territory administered by Tigray. Initially, Afwerki defined the conflict as an internal "Tigrinya affair." The TPLF-led Ethiopian government, however, responded by mobilizing the national army, and a two-year war ensued, claiming more than 100,000 lives. The Eritrean military was eventually driven out of Tigray and crushed in a final devastating offensive in May–June 2000.

From then until 2018, Eritrea and Ethiopia were locked in a "no war, no peace" impasse. The Ethiopian government had resisted implementing in full the border demarcation decision of the Ethiopian–Eritrean Boundary Commission, the international arbitration mechanism put in place to solve the issue of disputed territories as part of the comprehensive peace agreement of 2000. Instead, Addis Ababa imposed a diplomatic and economic containment strategy aimed at neutralizing Eritrea's influence and agency in the Horn of Africa. The sustained hostility between the two countries was used as an excuse by Afwerki to suspend the Eritrean constitution and civil rights, and to maintain full war mobilization for 20 years and counting, including compulsory conscription of indefinite duration for both men and women.

The coming to power of an Oromo prime minister in Ethiopia, on the back of sustained anti-TPLF protests, changed Afwerki's approach to his archenemy. In June 2018, he accepted Abiy's invitation to commence a political dialogue and forge a new relationship. But Afwerki's intentions for the process became clear in the speech he gave on June 20—Martyrs' Day, one of the most important public holidays in Eritrea, honoring the fallen fighters in the war of liberation—with his infamous statement, "Game over, TPLF!" He was cheering the ouster of the Tigrayan political leadership from the EPRDF and from government positions. The subsequent outbreak of war and the brutal campaign carried out by Eritrean troops in Tigray, where they have been accused of committing widespread war crimes, indicate that the Eritrean president seized the opportunity to forge an alliance with the new powerholders in Addis Ababa in order to pursue his long-sought revenge on the TPLF.

Afwerki has been the strongest critic of the TPLF-favored multinational federal system in Ethiopia since its introduction. In an interview in early January 2022 on Eritrean national television, he again called on Ethiopia to dismantle its federal system and criticized Abiy for acting too slowly to eradicate the legacy of the TPLF. He predicted trouble for Ethiopia in years to come as a result.

FRUSTRATED OROMO HOPES

As the country's largest ethnic group, comprising about 35 percent of the total population, the Oromo people have a complex role in Ethiopia. Oromo political actors' perceptions of Ethiopian statehood are divergent, reflecting the heterogenous cultural makeup of the group and the different ways Oromo elites position themselves vis-à-vis the political center. The Shewan-Oromo, for instance, have been represented at the royal court for centuries, whereas Muslim Oromo clans in Hararghe, Bale, and Arsi have been "othered" by the Ethiopian state, politically marginalized and subjugated. Oromos in these areas were ruled by outsiders dispatched by the emperor, and local interests and concerns were usually neglected.

Localized Oromo rebellions against the central government had flared up irregularly, but it was in the 1960s that a pan-Oromo political consciousness started to emerge. A new class of educated Oromos challenged the Amharization policy of the centralizing and repressive state, establishing the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) in 1974 and launching an armed struggle. The political objective of the Oromo cause has oscillated between secession and the establishment of an independent Oromia state on the one hand, and assuming control of the central government through the ballot box (since the Oromo constitute the largest voting bloc) on the other.

Ideologically, the OLF and the TPLF are cut from the same cloth, both emphasizing political and cultural autonomy at the ethnic group level. Yet the TPLF refused to recognize the OLF as the front representing the Oromo or to include it in the EPRDF coalition. Instead, it set up a competing Oromo organization under its control, sowing further seeds of mistrust.

After the fall of the Derg, however, the OLF joined the transitional government headed by the EPRDF. It was instrumental in drafting the principles of ethnic federalism enshrined in the Transitional Charter of 1991, which was converted into the 1995 constitution. But TPLF machinations during the transitional phase led to an OLF boycott of the first local and regional elections in 1992, igniting a resumption of its armed struggle to establish an Oromo state.

Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, the OLF claimed to be the genuine political voice of the pan-Oromo struggle against a repressive state, casting the Oromo representatives in the EPRDF as "traitors" selling out *Oromummaa* (Oromoness and Oromo nationalism). As the coercive capacities of the state increased, the OLF leadership and fighters were forced to relocate to Eritrea. This opened space for other Oromo political organizations to redefine the Oromo struggle within an Ethiopian framework.

Sustained, massive demonstrations organized by the Oromo youth movement known as *Qerroo/Qarree*, starting in 2014, were harnessed by the Oromo faction within the EPRDF to propel Abiy to the helm of both the coalition and the government. For the first time in Ethiopian history, an Oromo representative would occupy the apex of power openly, not cloaked in an Amharized guise as in earlier periods. This created great optimism among Oromos. By inviting the OLF and other dissenters to rejoin the political process, Abiy demonstrated an interest in accommodating long-held Oromo political aspirations. But the OLF's deep distrust of the EPRDF led to a "tactical" split of the front into a political wing, which became a legally registered party, and an armed wing, the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA), which continued fighting.

Abiy's subsequent establishment of the Prosperity Party, and his shift away from an ethnonational discourse and toward an emphasis on *Ethiopiawinet*, stirred resentment among Oromo politicians both within the ruling party and in the opposition. The surge of pan-Ethiopian and Amhara nationalism as a consequence of the war on Tigray further contributed to strengthening the Oromo armed struggle. The OLA has reportedly drawn thousands of new recruits and has become a considerable military actor, challenging regional and federal forces in combat across the Oromia RS.

Advocates of *Oromummaa* now believe that Abiy will not fulfill their aspirations of genuine Oromo representation at the center of politics in Ethiopia. If the democratic space remains securitized and controlled by the PP, it is likely that the pan-Oromo struggle again will coalesce around secessionism, possibly in an alliance with the TPLF.

PEACEMAKING CHALLENGES

The resurgence of civil war has exposed the deep, old fissures in Ethiopian statehood. The multinational federal model was born out of years of civil war and introduced by the victors as a means to keep the fractured state together under a new dispensation. By granting full political autonomy to the country's many ethnic groups, it was argued, trust in the central government could be restored. If any group feared the restoration of a repressive and culturally subjugating central government, the constitution included an "exit clause" in Article 39, which allows for the possibility of withdrawing from the federation and establishing separate states.

Today, these same principles are invoked by one side in the war and contested by the other. The reformed ruling party has expressed an interest in revisiting the constitutional framework in order to amend and mute the "ethnic" aspects of the federation. Other political actors, including those denied inclusion in the constitutional deliberations after the fall of the Derg, argue for scrapping the current constitution altogether and creating a new one from scratch.

Arguably, the multinational federal system was successful in pacifying some ethnic-based conflicts, while concurrently deepening old fault lines and creating new ones. But since the constitutional framework for the past 30 years has primarily been in effect on paper, not in practice, it is empirically unwarranted to conclude that the multinational federal order contributed either to peacemaking or to conflict-creation in Ethiopia. The continuation of authoritarian practices and the subjugation of regional political aspirations and general political opposition, during TPLF/EPRDF rule and beyond, appear to be the main conflict drivers.

The Ethiopian government released some key opposition leaders in early 2022 and dropped charges against them, while launching a so-called National Dialogue process. The initiative was hamstrung from its inception, however, by the exclusion of the political opposition from the development of the dialogue's framework, which largely rests on the Prosperity Party's understanding of *Ethiopiawinet*. Further complicating the situation is the continued detention of some opposition leaders, as well as the exclusion of the other belligerent parties in the conflict, which have been designated as "terrorist organizations" by the government.

The complexities of Ethiopia's civil war make it a challenge for peacemaking. So far, the conflict has exposed the international community's incapacity to handle the situation, let alone provide basic humanitarian aid to the conflict-stricken populations. The UN Security Council is stymied—the insistence of Russia and China on noninterference has blocked any resolution addressing the conflict. In August 2021, the African Union appointed former Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo as a high representative to seek a settlement, but his efforts have brought no tangible results as of this writing. The United States and the European Union have likewise designated special envoys to the Horn of Africa to assist in peace diplomacy, but so far those efforts have also been in vain. After a Tigrayan retreat in December 2021, armed clashes have continued along the borders of the Afar and Amhara regions, along with aerial bombardment of Tigrayan towns by federal forces.

To create a sustainable solution to the Ethiopian civil war, if one were at all possible, would necessitate a comprehensive, inclusive, and multipronged approach reflecting the four different conflict dimensions outlined above, and more. But the broader political context is packed with domestic and international tensions. There is an increasingly fraught geopolitical situation in the Horn of Africa as Middle Eastern powers compete for influence in Ethiopia, clashes continue in a border conflict between Sudan and Ethiopia, and Egypt denounces the newly activated Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam on the Blue Nile. In this context, the declaration of a truce in Tigray in late March may be seen as a sign of ongoing confidential talks between the parties, though it has not facilitated the promised unimpeded humanitarian access. It thus seems unlikely that a sustainable solution to the Ethiopian civil war will be reached anytime soon. ■

"[I]n many parts of the country, the armed forces have become the principal or even the only state institution on the ground."

Chad after Idriss Déby

JUDITH SCHEELE

On April 19, 2021, supporters of Chadian President Idriss Déby Itno gathered on Independence Square in the capital, N'Djamena, to celebrate Déby's electoral victory securing a sixth term in office. Hours later, in the early morning of the 20th, it was announced that the president had died of battle wounds while leading troops against a rebel group, the Front for Change and Concord in Chad (FACT), in the northwest of the country. Disregarding constitutional provisions for a civilian transition, executive power passed on directly to Déby's son, General Mahamat Idriss Déby, at the head of a 14-member Transitional Military Council (CMT). The CMT suspended the constitution and dissolved the national parliament. It committed to holding elections after 18 months—on the condition that international donors pay for them—but many in Chad and abroad doubt that the CMT can and will be held to this promise.

Nonetheless, the CMT received international endorsements, and 12 heads of states, including French President Emmanuel Macron, attended the state funeral of their "courageous friend" (as Macron put it) on April 23. Meanwhile, demonstrations against the military takeover were violently suppressed by the Chadian military, leaving at least six dead. Since then, the "inclusive national dialogue" intended to prepare the transition to civilian rule has been postponed from February 15 to May 10, 2022, probably in response to an anti-junta rally on January 8, led by the civilian opposition leader Succès Masra and his political party Les Transformateurs.

This brief summary of events raises a number of questions. My aim here is not to answer them in any definite way, or indeed to establish "the truth about Déby." Instead, I would like to use them as a way into the Chadian political system more generally.

In 2000, Peter Rosenblum asked in the pages of this journal whether Chad was "a country or a collection of ethnic warlords fighting behind the veneer of a modern state with its French-style bureaucracy, French-backed military, and heavy dependence on foreign assistance." These dichotomies do not get us very far. Chad is, of course, a country, and Déby was much more than an "ethnic warlord." He was an internationally recognized president, lauded and courted by many as the "new strongman" of the Sahel, however appalling his human rights record. Nor is (or was) the Chadian state a "veneer"; rather, it represents a particular kind of political formation—based essentially on predation and repression—that is actively sustained by the ongoing militarization of the Sahel in the name of "international security." Déby's demise, and the "soft coup" and quick dynastic succession that ensued, are symptomatic of larger developments that certainly have their roots in the particularities of Chadian history, yet hold lessons for the region as a whole.

WEAKNESS AND POWER

In early 2013, I was contacted by the British Foreign Office. They wanted to know if Déby was going to be the "new strongman" of the region. Muammar Qaddafi had been deposed in Libya the year before, and they needed somebody to step into his shoes. Indeed, in the following years, Déby gradually became "the boss of the Sahel" (as he was called in the magazine *Jeune Afrique* in 2015) and "an absolutely major ally in the struggle against terrorism in the Sahel," as French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian said in 2019.

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Back in 2013, however, I had difficulty understanding the Foreign Office's question. The Déby I had glimpsed was a weak figure, closer to a trickster than a strongman. In the north of the country, at least, where I had carried out fieldwork (and where he was from), people said proudly that he had no influence whatsoever. According to them, he held onto office because he regularly imprisoned his closest family members and friends whom he accused of plotting coups, or else paid them off with lavish sums, and he could always rely on the French army for support, and on the French treasury to bail him out. His state seemed to be a ramshackle bunch of men with guns, as likely to follow his orders as not.

This was all made visible in 2018, when Déby attempted to claim state control over the newly discovered gold fields of Miski in the Tibesti region, in the extreme north of the country. His army, and then even the elite presidential guard under his son Mahamat's command, were routed by "local defense groups" led by "customary chiefs." This was not so much because of the army's lack of fighting power as because army commanders had no desire to fight their own allies and relations and found other, more lucrative, occupations while stationed next to a gold mine. Eventually, Déby was obliged to accept negotiations, despite the vitriol poured on the miners—according to his interior minister, they were "drug and arms traffickers . . . mercenaries, and . . . slave-drivers" to a man.

Much like his state and army, Déby appeared strong and weak at the same time.

International statistics tend to confirm the weakness of the Chadian state. Chad is consistently at or near the bottom in rankings of countries by human development indices. Average living standards are among the lowest in the world. Oil revenues that have been available to Chad since the opening of the Doba oil fields in 2003 have done little to change this.

Much like his state and army, Déby appeared strong and weak at the same time. In international and much national media coverage, the most common way of squaring this paradox was by pointing to French influence. The French helped Déby into power in 1990, and then saved him twice, in 2006 and 2008, from rebel forces converging on the presidential palace. They intervened again, in 2019, against rebel columns advancing from the extreme north, led by Déby's nephew Timan Erdimi. Every morning, the capital wakes up to the sound of two French Mirage fighter jets taking off from the military airport to survey the country's north, incidentally reminding all inhabitants of N'Djamena of their presence. Since the French colonial conquest in 1899, and notwithstanding Chadian independence in 1960, French soldiers have been stationed in Chad almost continuously.

Yet Déby was much more than a French puppet, nor was he merely an autocrat ruling his country singlehandedly. He was able to impose his own agenda on his international backers, and to play one against the other. He remained, for instance, one of Qaddafi's staunchest supporters well after NATO had decided that the Libyan ruler had to go.

Much of Déby's power was generated within Chad itself, through a political system that clearly did not live up to Weberian models of nation-states, but had its own principles and logics. Chad is, in fact, an excellent example not so much of "state failure" as of the limits of this kind of analysis. Failure assumes frustrated attempts to establish something—in this case, ideal-typical statehood, uniform territorial control, a monopoly on violence, power exclusively yielded by state institutions, equality and human development. There are no indications that Déby ever wanted to achieve any of these things.

Instead, his "weakness" was part and parcel of his system of rule. Déby himself repeatedly complained about the "total erosion of state authority" in the north of the country, but this "disorder" (another of his favorite terms) enabled a particular type of rule, based on the careful management of competing local sources of authority and influence. Throughout his thirty years in power, Déby fostered the proliferation both of state administrative positions and of "customary" institutions (many invented for the purpose), while also appointing himself to the office of "sultan" in his home region from 2010 until 2019. Such positions were granted as sinecures, their very abundance limiting individual power and influence. State officials acted primarily as arbiters between the conflicting interests that they had often created themselves. The importance of *diya* payments in order to regulate Chadian political life, hierarchies, and even political dissent—a subversion of the state justice system and an ever-present bone of contention with oppositional forces—bears witness to this state of affairs.

As a result, Déby was well able to manipulate different power-holders, but he could not quite do without them. After all, some customary chiefs had been in power even longer than Déby himself. This was the case, for instance, with the Anakazza *chef de canton* in Faya in the north of the country, who had been powerful under Déby's predecessor Hissène Habré and was also Déby's father-in-law—and, perhaps not incidentally, Mahamat Idriss Déby's maternal grandfather. The events at Miski, then, were exceptional not because local power-holders held off Déby's elite units, but because the more usual game of mutual threats followed by co-optation and compensation had broken down.

LIVING AND DYING BY THE SWORD

Déby, rumored to be seriously ill since 2014, had repeatedly announced that he would not die in his bed. Like his two predecessors, he had come to power in a coup, in 1990. In 2020, Déby had proclaimed himself "marshal of Chad," with great pomp, after a military victory over jihadi fighters in the Lake Chad region. He was quite as much at ease in military fatigues as in civilian clothes, and his presence on the battlefield, to galvanize his troops but also to discourage desertion, was routine. Until his death, his legitimacy was wrapped up with his martial prowess.

Chad is a heavily militarized country. In proportion to its population, the country has one of the largest and best trained and equipped armies in Africa. Large portions of Chad's oil revenue since 2003 have been spent on the military; defense expenditure soared by 663 percent between 2000 and 2009. It has since hovered between a quarter and a third of gross domestic product.

As a result, in many parts of the country, the armed forces have become the principal or even the only state institution on the ground. Many Chadians look to them for social advancement, but also for basic services—such as the provision of transport, electricity, housing, jobs, handouts, dispute resolution, and protection. State funds are often channeled through the armed forces, and basic property rights are decided by military fiat. This means that for many ordinary people, placing at least one relative in the armed forces is simply a necessity of life. Military enrollment can come in many forms, and does not necessarily imply violence.

There can be no doubt that this has militarized society. Yet it has also socialized the army, which is thoroughly penetrated by nonmilitary concerns, alliances, and hierarchies. Rebel regiments that sign peace agreements tend to be recruited wholesale, alongside their erstwhile leaders. Official military hierarchies are often sidelined, and even Déby's position within the army was often that of an arbitrator rather than a commander. The army is itself deeply divided, reflecting cleavages in Chadian society. Badly paid low-ranking soldiers from the south, stationed with barely any supplies or shelter in the Tibesti, have little in common with high-ranking generals in the presidential guard, "untouchables" who can literally get away with murder—or with ordinary northern customs officers taxing the lucrative transborder trade with Cameroon.

This close imbrication between the military and society at large has made it notoriously difficult to count Chadian soldiers. In 2010, Déby said there were 80,000; external figures variously put the number closer to 35,000, or somewhere between 40,000 and 64,000. The uncertainty thus created is productive; as one officer in the north of the country noted with a smirk, "On paper you have a whole regiment, which brings salaries and equipment, but this is simply a way of buying consent."

International donors have long encouraged Chad to reduce its armed forces, but here as elsewhere, such retrenchment campaigns have little effect on the ground, since they are usually followed by immediate reenlistment. Given the close overlap between the army and sections of society, to reform one would in fact mean reforming the other—and considering the ease with which disgruntled military officers rebel, this would be a risky undertaking. Moreover, as long as society and army overlap, the regime continues to have at least a fragile hold on the former.

The recent international infatuation for the Chadian army has put such projects on hold, in any case. Chadian troops have long intervened throughout the region: in Congo in 1997 and 2000, in the Central African Republic almost continuously since the 1980s, in Sudan in the 2000s. But it was its 2013 intervention in northern Mali, alongside France, that made Chad a valued ally in the "global war on terror." Chadian soldiers still form an important part of Minusma, the United Nations mission in Mali; of the US-funded Multi-National Task Force fighting in the Chad Basin against the jihadist group Boko Haram; and of the EU-funded G5 Sahel.

We can surmise that inhabitants of target countries are hardly reassured when Chadian troops arrive on their soil. They have long known these soldiers in other guises, as "Chadian militias" or "Chadian gunmen," whose human rights record is generally poor. Yet in international eyes, Chad's soldiers have been promoted in a relatively short time from the scourge of their nation to the country's most valuable asset.

Chadian commentators openly wonder how one of the poorest countries in the world can sustain this international engagement. More than a fifth of the Chadian army is stationed abroad, and together, these foreign contingents are larger than many other national armies in the Sahel. From the regime's point of view, this is an assertion of regional predominance, which has its own indirect dividends (debt relief, for instance). It is also a way of keeping potential troublemakers occupied elsewhere, earning glory and recognition at somebody else's expense, far away from the presidential palace in N'Djamena.

But there are costs, and both critics and soldiers themselves increasingly grumble about their long stints abroad and the high casualty rates. Chadian soldiers, vaunted for their courage in battle, tend to die at a much higher rate than their European and even other African counterparts. Déby's repeated threats to withdraw his soldiers from their many engagements in the region were also aimed at an internal audience.

The border between Libya and Chad is not so much a barrier as a resource for locals.

Among Mahamat Déby's first official declarations were his statements of intention to reform the army, to make soldiers eligible for social security, and to streamline recruitment. His first trip abroad was a visit to the Chadian regiment stationed in Tera in neighboring Niger. In August 2021, he reduced by half the number of soldiers fighting in the three-border area between Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. A month later, his defense minister announced a new nationwide recruitment drive. Mahamat knows that his own fortune is bound up with the military, and that expanding the army, and treating it well, is the surest way of creating a broad base of support in a country where no other institution (with perhaps the exception of Déby *père*'s party, the Mouvement Patriotique du Salut, or Patriotic Salvation Movement) has a similar reach.

FAMILY AFFAIRS

In addition to the official narrative, many versions of Déby's demise circulate in Chad and beyond. Many find it difficult to believe that the president, relying on French military intelligence and logistical support and at the head of a superior fighting force, could have been killed quite so easily. They point to the large number of generals (four or six) supposedly killed at the same time. Alternative stories speak of betrayal by the rebels, of peace talks that turned sour.

Others maintain that Déby was shot by one of his own generals, whose aging aunt Déby's forces had accidentally killed when trying to arrest Yaya Dillo, a rival candidate in the 2021 presidential elections, and a cousin of both Déby and the general. After a resounding victory over FACT, this story continues, the general had come to Déby's tent to ask him for his aunt's dead body; Déby shot him; others intervened, and a number of high-ranking officers—all cousins to both Déby and Dillo—were killed in the ensuing scramble. The whole event had been witnessed by a French army officer, who immediately alerted his superiors. Half an hour later, Emmanuel Macron himself was on the phone to Déby's son Mahamat, "investing" him with his father's succession.

This narrative is interesting not so much for its truth value, but for what it assumes about power in Chad. Déby's death, it implies, was not the result of external hostility, but was literally a family affair, due to an excess of proximity among his generals, which made loyalty dangerously labile. The most serious challenges Déby faced during his thirty years in office were rebellions launched by his closest advisers and family members, and Déby himself had risen to power by betraying his erstwhile friend and patron, Hissène Habré. This image also fed into Déby's personal mystique, which proclaimed him to be invincible to all but his nearest and dearest.

The warrant for Yaya Dillo's arrest had been issued after he publicly criticized Hinda, Déby's fourth wife, for unlawfully appropriating public funds earmarked for responding to the COVID-19 pandemic. Déby fell, this narrative implies, because he protected his wife to the detriment of his cousins. Much has been written about Chad being governed by one "ethnic group" to the exclusion of all others. Given the low population density and complicated linguistic mosaic in northern Chad, where one "ethnic group" shades into another and few people are ever just one thing, it is perhaps more productive to think in terms of family connections. These are never just given, but actively made, in a context where everybody is potentially related to everybody else. Women are central to this.

Déby spent much of his reign actively extending his family, by claiming privileged ties to his maternal family (adding his maternal grandfather's name, Itno, to his own, in 2006), and through multiple marriages. In 2012, for instance, he married Amina Hilal, daughter of Musa Hilal, the infamous Darfur militia leader. Neither groom nor bride was present at the ceremony, and public attention was mostly dazzled—and outraged—by the amount of bride-wealth handed over. This is also how Déby managed potential dissent back home: his successor Mahamat, and Mahamat's wife's mother, are both from influential Anakazza families (as was Habré). One of the first things the new ruler did, in any case, was to dismiss Hinda—who left Chad in the meantime—and her relatives from key positions in national oil companies. The much-decried "dynastic succession" might in fact hide a change of in-laws.

REBELS, JIHADIS, MERCENARIES

Whatever really happened, Déby was killed while he was on the battlefield facing the FACT. This rebel force, led by Mahamat Ahmat Mahadi—opposition politician, long-term refugee in France (where he was an active member of the Socialist Party), and sometime state employee in Chad—was initially a splinter movement that broke off from former government minister Mahamat Nouri's Union of Forces for Democracy and Development (UFDD) in 2016. It was, in other words, part of a nebula of rebel groups that mostly recruited among Tubu-speakers in the north and northwest of the country. Like similar movements, it was largely based in southern Libya, where the current conflict provides both safe havens and job opportunities for Chadian militants—a role that had mostly been played by Sudan until Qaddafi's demise in 2011.

After Déby's death was announced, videos circulated on social media showing long columns of FACT fighters, extremely well equipped, advancing toward N'Djamena. The videos turned out to be a hoax—they had been filmed in Libya or Sudan—but they were symptomatic of the difficulty of understanding who exactly is involved in any given rebellion. Partly this is so because it doesn't really matter: most rebellions in Chad are ways not so much of overthrowing as of becoming part of the government and the military establishment. This in turn depends not only on the rebels' real fighting power, but also on their ability to constitute themselves as a credible threat. Doing so involves a well-rehearsed ballet of claims and counter-claims, coupled with a particular military aesthetic. Though Mahadi claimed to have 9,000 fighters at his command, and others speak of 400 armed pickup trucks, membership in these groups is floating; most draw on a common pool of recruits, which they also share with the national army.

Although the Chadian regime is well aware of all this, it immediately vilified the FACT as "Libyan mercenaries" and jihadis. Both terms are performative speech acts that appeal to a particular set of allies. Labeling opponents as jihadis is a relatively sure way of getting international attention and military support. This is exactly what happened in 2019, when Déby's nephew Timan Erdimi entered Chad at the head of a rebel column, and was bombed by French forces under the pretext of fighting against "international terrorism." Déby used the same strategy against the FACT and Mahamat Nouri's UFDD; France obligingly froze their assets in 2017 and arrested Nouri. Yet the FACT were clearly not jihadis, and Chad more generally had been relatively immune to jihadi attacks. Some even surmised that an unofficial pact of non-aggression had been concluded between Déby and Boko Haram—until Déby decided, in 2014, to join the internationally sponsored fight against them.

Labeling rebels as "Libyan mercenaries" appeals to a different register, evoking international law and long-standing worries about Libyan meddling in Chadian affairs. It brings back memories of Chad's 1965–87 civil war, when conflicting loyalties and cross-border ties often blurred boundaries between Libyan and Chadian fighters. It also echoes Libyan allegations, prominent since 2011, about the presence of "African mercenaries" on its territory, and points to real worries resulting from the deteriorating situation in southern Libya. Talk of mercenaries additionally speaks to international fears, especially when Chadian sources claim that FACT was equipped and trained by Russians associated with the Wagner Group, a Russian paramilitary organization, in Libyan militia leader Khalifa Haftar's camps.

It is true that the border between Libya and Chad, which has been officially closed since March 2019, is not so much a barrier as a resource for local inhabitants, who control and tax all forms of mobility across it. Connections between southern Libya and northern Chad are old—older than both countries themselves; the two regions are economically interdependent, and share a common history of exchange and settlement. It is equally true that in contemporary Libya, experienced fighters can easily find employment. By 2015, international experts estimated the number of Tubu fighters in Libya at several hundred; FACT troops occasionally fought alongside Haftar. During my own fieldwork in 2012, people received news daily of family members—often but not always long-standing residents in Libya or Libyan citizens—killed while fighting in Libya, and wakes held for them punctuated local routines.

Yet none of the Chadian rebel groups stationed in Libya would qualify as mercenaries under the Geneva Conventions. Most use Libya as a base from which to prepare their own political projects in Chad, following a model common in Chadian history: Idriss Déby himself launched his attack on N'Djamena from Sudan (with Libyan help), as had his predecessor Hissène Habré. In such a context, the constant use of the term "mercenary" by Chadian officials, and the international echo that it creates, shows how the overlap of racialist, nationalist, and international phobias is used to create an enemy of all mankind who can then be killed with relative impunity.

In any case, insofar as Chadian rebel leaders are concerned, these labels are only temporary; everybody knows that rebels might become ministers and then rebels again. Mahamat has since agreed to hold talks with most "politico-military groups" (as armed rebellions are referred to in Chad), including FACT and his cousins, Tom and Timan Erdimi, Déby *père*'s archenemies. Rather than a profound change in politics, this is an indication of continuity, since the "integration" of rebels into the government and the army has long been the most common way to deal with political unrest in Chad.

MUTUAL DEPENDENCIES

According to official accounts, before assuming power, Mahamat consulted first with the 14 army officers who would make up the Transitory Military Council; then with the French ambassador to Chad, and the envoys of the African Union and the UN; then with Chadian religious chiefs and "notables." This provides a clear illustration of who is seen to legitimize political power in Chad today, and in what order. One notes the complete absence of political parties or the national assembly; indeed, of any notion of "the people" that would not already be subsumed within the armed forces or "customary institutions."

The involvement of international organizations, and their rapid endorsement of Mahamat, shows that the diligent diplomatic labor that Déby had performed since the 2010s had borne fruit. Yet it is France's steadfast backing, first of Déby *père*, then of Déby *fils*, that has attracted the greatest attention. Chad is, after all, at the heart of the French military apparatus in the Sahel. Despite repeated and rather half-hearted claims that France will finally retreat militarily from the continent, the number of French soldiers on the ground has steadily risen since their intervention in Mali in 2013. Even Macron's recent announcement of the end of military operations in Mali seems in fact to point toward their redefinition as multilateral rather than bilateral—a way of spreading risks and countering rising African criticism of France's "neo-imperial" strategies.

So much is known, but it remains difficult to see what France actually stands to gain. Despite the strategic importance of neighboring Niger's uranium mines, the Sahel countries are just too poor for straightforward economic explanations to hold. France's interest, then, seems to rest on less tangible assets: influence, honor, reputation, credibility, the ability to act as a world power, which everywhere else is clearly beyond its reach; coupled with the fear of international migration and "global jihad," which appears to be real in some circles. The desire for greatness has made successive French presidents dependent on their army, and on the wishes of African elites (witness the current tussle with Mali); it is never quite clear who is actually in the driver's seat.

Lest we should think that this is a particular French problem, linked to French "delusions of grandeur," as Adekeye Adebajo suggested in this journal in 2014, it is important to remember that developments in Chad are part of a more general "securitization" of international relations with the African continent. In 2016, more than half of US foreign assistance to Africa was managed by the Pentagon. In 2017, 29 percent was directly earmarked for military aid, 11 percent for "political and strategic" sectors, and 6 percent for "nonmilitary security." The United States lavishly funds "anti-terrorist" campaigns in the Lake Chad region through the Multi-National Joint Task Force, whose notorious brutality is one of Boko Haram's principal recruitment assets. The Task Force and the G5 mission both rely on militias recruited locally, to the point where observers now speak of a "security traffic jam" in the region, and wonder what will happen to the plethora of armed men once "the West" is tired of funding them.

Throughout the African continent, militaries are often the only institutions that were sheltered from structural reforms imposed by the International Monetary Fund. Therefore they have been able to maintain their position and infrastructure, or even to increase them in the name of counterterrorism. Where parts of the state have become coterminous with the military, it is difficult to demilitarize governments, since this threatens not only the direct power of the army but also its social and economic reach.

Mali and Sudan, whose militaries staged coups in August and October 2021, respectively, in order to avoid relinquishing power to civilians, provide cases in point. So do Burkina Faso, Egypt, and Algeria, where it is clearly much easier to change presidents than to challenge the army's structural control. Chad, in this sense, is but an extreme example of a scenario that is about to become ever more common in the region, much to the detriment of its civilian population. ■

> **“[E]xplanations for the country’s current crisis include the monopolization of political institutions by a disciplined and hierarchical ruling party, the capture of most economic resources by political insiders and transnational corporations, and violent conflict.”**

The Elusive Dream of Democracy, Security, and Well-Being in Mozambique

CELSO M. MONJANE AND M. ANNE PITCHER

An integral element of the 1992 peace accords that ended a 16-year armed conflict between Mozambique’s ruling party, Frelimo, and the rebel movement, Renamo, was an agreement to hold regular, multiparty elections. But over the 30 years since that agreement took effect, Frelimo has misused its access to state power to guarantee its repeated electoral victories and to undermine popular support for the opposition. The party’s conduct calls into question whether liberal democracy will ever have a chance in Mozambique.

Peace and prosperity have proved just as elusive. Because it has been unable to make political gains electorally or legislatively, Renamo has periodically relied on violent attacks to exact concessions from Frelimo, which has responded with similar tactics to retain power. An insurgent movement with ties to Islamic extremists has plagued the north of the country since 2017.

Things are not much better on the economic front. The costs of corruption, illicit financial flows, and a $2 billion loan scam have fallen most heavily on the poor. Mozambique’s debt now amounts to $15 billion, for a whopping debt-to-GDP ratio of 100 percent.

Analysts often explain democratic weakness, resurgent conflict, and corruption in Africa by pointing to endemic ethnic strife, “big man” politics, or the resource curse. These characteristics are present in Mozambique, too, but they do not sufficiently capture the dynamics of its political economy since 1992. Better explanations for the country’s current crisis include the monopolization of political institutions by a disciplined and hierarchical ruling party, the capture of most economic resources by political insiders and transnational corporations, and violent conflict.

POSTWAR GAINS AND LOSSES

The Mozambique of 2022 looks very different from the Mozambique of 30 years ago. In 1992, the country had two evenly matched political rivals and an economy in ruins. After the peace accords, Frelimo remained in control of the state but was weakened by years of conflict. Renamo had considerable military strength and support in the middle of the country. Sixteen years of war had brought the economy to its knees: growth rates in the early 1990s were negative, and the country was deeply in debt.

In return for generous financial and technical support, donors, including the United States, convinced Frelimo to abandon socialism, adopt a market economy, and embrace multiparty politics. In 1994, the former armed foes faced each other in the country’s first multiparty elections. In the legislative elections, Frelimo won 129 seats; Renamo took 112 seats. Frelimo’s presidential candidate, Joaquim Chissano, won comfortably with 53 percent of the vote. He had previously been appointed to the post by Frelimo in 1986 following the death of Samora Machel, the country’s first president since independence in 1975.

By 2022, Mozambique had held six national elections at regular intervals. Frelimo has retained power under three different presidents. A constitutionally mandated, two-term limit for the

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presidency has been institutionalized. Civil society and independent media are small-scale, but active and vocal.

Meanwhile, the government has privatized most of its state-owned enterprises, selling them off to both domestic and foreign investors. Although the country is still heavily dependent on overseas development assistance, foreign investment has consistently outpaced aid in the past decade. Mozambique has developed trade relations not only with other African countries, such as South Africa, but also with the Netherlands, China, India, and the United Arab Emirates. Mozambique also continues to trade with Portugal, the former colonial power.

After an economic contraction in 1992, the average growth rate between 1993 and 2019 (prior to the pandemic) was 7.2 percent per year. The poverty rate declined from nearly 68 percent of the population in 1996 to 46 percent in 2014, though it has been rising since 2015.

Despite the many substantive and positive changes over the past 30 years, current assessments of political and economic conditions in Mozambique range from pessimistic to alarmist. Most rankings of the political system place it squarely in the "electoral autocracy" camp. Election irregularities and constraints on freedom of expression and participation all but guarantee victories for the ruling party.

Besides the effects of climate change, which have produced deadly floods in Mozambique over the past few years, the COVID-19 pandemic has strained the fragile health care system and dried up the tourist trade, which accounted for about 9 percent of GDP in 2018. A growing jihadist insurgency has resulted in the deaths of over 3,500 people, uprooted nearly a million more, and delayed the development of rich natural gas deposits off the northern coast. A $2 billion loan fraud involving politicians at the highest level—known as the "tuna bond" or "hidden debts" scandal—has slashed Mozambique's international credit rating, damaged investor confidence, and undercut public trust.

FRELIMO'S STRANGLEHOLD

In the 1999 election—the second since the peace accords—President Joaquim Chissano narrowly won reelection, defeating Renamo leader Afonso Dhlakama. Renamo's allegations that Frelimo had falsified the results to deny Dhlakama's victory were rejected by the National Electoral Commission and ultimately by the Constitutional Court, which validated the results, but journalists and academics later found the allegations to be credible. After that close call, Frelimo notables determined that endemic corruption and weak linkages between the party and its supporters accounted for the near loss of power. To strengthen the base and clean up Frelimo's image, the party's Central Committee chose Armando Guebuza, a distinguished veteran of the anticolonial struggle, as the party's 2004 presidential nominee. During the campaign, Guebuza criticized Chissano's style of governance and pledged to curb corruption and inefficiency in the public sector. Besides pledging to improve the well-being of all Mozambicans, especially the poor, Guebuza also highlighted the ways in which market competition, domestic entrepreneurs, and foreign investors could contribute to national development.

Foreign investment has consistently outpaced aid in the past decade.

Following a commanding victory, Guebuza launched an anticorruption campaign. The initiative gained considerable respect from the public but sowed fear among fellow members of the party, especially after several former ministers were brought to trial on corruption charges. Among the most prominent were Almerino Manhenje and António Munguambe, two onetime members of Chissano's cabinet who were sentenced to two and twenty years in prison, respectively. The trials served another purpose: Guebuza used them to weaken rival factions within Frelimo and to convince party notables that he was prepared to punish disloyalty to him or his political agenda.

Having sidelined his rivals, Guebuza proceeded to reinvigorate party cells within state institutions by requiring membership in Frelimo as a condition of appointment to higher levels of the public sector. To further cement the linkage between the party and the state (which had previously been a feature of Mozambican politics when Frelimo ran a one-party state after independence), Guebuza also appointed provincial party secretaries to local government positions. This "frelimization" of institutions was loudly denounced by the opposition and civil society. But Guebuza also sought to resuscitate the foundational organizing principle of "national unity" orchestrated by, and through, the Frelimo party. Repackaging popular phrases used by Samora Machel during the anticolonial war, he reminded Mozambicans of their heroic struggle for independence and called on them to fight against poverty and for peace and democracy.

To revive the base of the party at the local level, Guebuza launched the Local Initiative Investment Fund (later renamed the District Development Fund) in 2005, giving each district administrator the power to decide and manage 7 million meticais yearly (about $286,000 at 2005 exchange rates). Although the funds were ostensibly meant to develop districts and give them greater financial autonomy, they also bought the loyalty of beneficiaries. Some administrators used the money to furnish their offices and houses or to cover other personal expenses. Others issued loans for local business initiatives—one of the intended uses of the funds—but without requiring a sound business plan or expecting repayment. The key requirement was that borrowers be party members.

As a result of these measures, Guebuza and the ruling party handily won the 2009 general election. Guebuza took about 70 percent of the vote and Frelimo garnered two-thirds of the parliamentary seats, triggering opposition accusations of election rigging. Frelimo continued to dominate in subsequent elections despite increasing internal divisions and several scandals. With a new presidential candidate from the northern province of Cabo Delgado, Filipe Jacinto Nyusi, Frelimo was victorious again in 2014.

Nyusi won a second term in 2019. In that election, civil society activists, opposition parties, and poll observers denounced Frelimo's intimidation of opposition supporters, its reliance on state resources for its campaign, widespread electoral irregularities including "ghost" voters, and several targeted assassinations allegedly ordered by the ruling party.

DECLINING OPPOSITION

After nearly capturing the presidency in the 1999 elections, the major opposition party has seen its political fortunes decline. Some of Renamo's troubles have been of its own making. Its former leader, Afonso Dhlakama, was adept at forcing concessions from the Frelimo administration, but he failed to strengthen his own party machinery between elections. He relied on an autocratic, highly centralized leadership style to check the rise of other party officials who might have threatened his power. He frequently demoted or expelled those who became popular with voters or proved competent at their jobs, leaving the top echelons of the party without seasoned, professional leadership.

Daviz Simango, who was elected mayor of Beira on the Renamo ticket in 2003, experienced this treatment. Daviz was a son of Uria and Celina Simango, who were among the founders of Frelimo. They were allegedly murdered by Machel's government following independence. As mayor, Daviz improved the delivery of basic services such as garbage collection and reformed the city's financial administration. But when voters and the media applauded the improvements he made in Mozambique's second city, he was expelled from Renamo. He formed his own party, the Mozambican Democratic Movement, in 2009. After initially offering a refreshing alternative to the two main parties, it began to suffer the same fate as many opposition parties in Africa—marginalization by larger parties, a lack of institutionalization, and the concentration of power in the party leader. Daviz Simango died of COVID-19 in early 2021; his brother, Lutero, was elected by the party's electoral commission as the new leader.

Besides its internal clashes, Renamo has also been weakened by the practices and policies of Frelimo. The ruling party's oversight of the transition to a market economy deprived opposition supporters of access to economic opportunities. Former Renamo combatants who were integrated into the national military as part of the 1992 peace accords were pushed to the margins. Only recently, following another bout of conflict between Renamo and Frelimo, have a few Renamo combatants been appointed to high-ranking military positions. Renamo's disastrous showing in the 2009 elections—Dhlakama received only 16 percent of the vote for the presidency, and the party captured just 51 of the 250 seats in parliament—afforded Frelimo unprecedented power to pass legislation and to amend the constitution.

In response to this economic and political exclusion, Dhlakama demanded reforms. When his demands proved futile, he repudiated the 1992 peace accords and announced a resumption of war in 2013. He returned to Gorongosa, his former military base in the center of the country, and waged armed attacks to pressure Frelimo. The attacks continued intermittently in the run-up to the 2014 elections, as well as in advance of the

2018 municipal polls and 2019 national elections. That violent campaign yielded several concessions, including a switch to direct election of provincial governors, who previously had been appointed by the ruling party.

Dhlakama died suddenly in May 2018. As with many organizations dominated by “big men,” his death triggered a leadership struggle and crystallized factions within the party. Owing to its own weaknesses and Frelimo’s electoral manipulation, Renamo failed to win a single province in 2019—even in its traditional strongholds. With a hazy political program and its electoral machine in disarray, and having gone through a bitter internal struggle to select a new leader, Renamo’s prospects of survival are precarious. Even the military leverage used as a last resort by Dhlakama has been effectively ruled out by the peace deal signed by Nyusi and the new Renamo leader, Ossufo Momade, since Renamo’s military bases have been closed under its terms.

STATE CAPTURE AND SECRET LOANS

The political dominance of Frelimo is paralleled by the presence of its members in prominent positions across the Mozambican economy. In the early 2000s, Joel Hellman, Geraint Jones, and Daniel Kaufmann popularized the term “state capture” to describe the process whereby transnational companies were manipulating and co-opting state officials and institutions to gain financial advantage during the transition of Eastern European countries to market economies. In Mozambique, the process has been more of a two-way exchange.

The ruling party deprived opposition supporters of access to economic opportunities.

At the urging of the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and Western donors, the ruling party began privatizing substantial state holdings in the early 1990s. Foreign firms sought to curry favor with the government by appointing powerful politicians to their boards or offering them small stakes in new or privatized enterprises. Ruling party elites took advantage of the privatization process to gain substantial interests in nearly every sector of the economy, from agriculture and trade to finance and mining.

Already well underway during the Chissano administration, the process of state capture was refined and restructured under Guebuza. He centralized rents and opportunities; his loyalists benefited from state procurement contracts. Research by the Center for Public Integrity, as well as reporting by the investigative journalist Marcelo Mosse and our own studies, indicate that presidents and their families, ministers, deputy ministers, governors, military officers, veterans of the liberation struggle, and members of parliament have interests in hundreds of companies involved in agriculture, timber, industrial sectors, import-export, finance, and tourism. Elites are connected to each other through interlocking directorships, holding companies, subsidiaries, and joint ventures. According to several recent reports, some high-ranking government and military officials, party elites, customs agents, and local police are also involved in the illicit trade of gemstones and heroin.

But the real jewel consists of vast offshore natural gas deposits in the north. Their presence has been suspected at least since the colonial period, but exploration was accelerated under Guebuza. Together with coal mining, Guebuza viewed the development of gas reserves as an opportunity not only to enhance his personal wealth, but also for the country to gain some economic independence from the West by catering to China’s demand for resources. Geological studies in 2010 confirmed an estimated 180 trillion cubic feet of gas deposits in the Rovuma Basin, in the deep waters of the Indian Ocean off the coast of Cabo Delgado. Transnational companies soon rushed in. The US energy company Anadarko was the first mover, followed in 2011 by Italian firm ENI.

The discovery of gas has shifted the center of gravity of both Mozambique’s economic prospects and its political power to the north. A number of currently serving and retired army generals—including Alberto Chipande, Lagos Lidimo, Salvador Mtumuke, and Raimundo Pachinuapa, all of whom belong to the Makonde, the main ethnic group in Cabo Delgado—have formed energy, hydrocarbon, mining, and security companies to exploit the opportunities brought by gas as well as gemstones and other resources. They have flexed their political muscles, too, joining other Frelimo party notables and civil society actors to thwart Guebuza’s efforts to run for a third term, and playing their cards so that one of their own, Nyusi, could ascend to the presidency. Nyusi not only is a Makonde from Cabo Delgado, but also served as minister of defense under Guebuza. With him as president, many observers believe that control over the state and business has shifted decisively into the hands of the Chipande family and other Makonde strongmen.

Just as northern political entrepreneurs consolidated their power, the Nyusi administration became embroiled in a scandal over foreign loans obtained during Guebuza's presidency. In 2012, with gas development underway, officials secretly contracted with Russian state-owned bank VTB and Credit Suisse to receive state-secured loans of $2 billion, ostensibly to purchase military equipment for Mozambique's maritime defense and security needs and to upgrade its fishing fleet. After Guebuza completed his term, allegations emerged of bribery, corruption, and willful secrecy in the securing of the loans, implicating several prominent politicians, including the current president and his predecessor.

In response, donors suspended direct support to Mozambique's state budget, plunging the country into a severe economic crisis. Though the sanctions were intended to punish the political elite, the crisis mostly hurt the poor and reversed the gains the country had made in the fight against poverty. Top government officials escaped serious punishment.

Donors pushed for an independent audit, which was conducted by Kroll, a New York–based corporate investigations firm. Kroll's findings suggested that there had been a scheme to divert the borrowed funds to private Mozambican individuals. The scheme was aided by a host of advisers, lawyers, and intermediaries in the West and elsewhere, who all received commissions for their services.

The security services disputed the findings, claiming that since they could not share classified information with Kroll, the firm's report had not captured the full story. Yet several trials connected to the case in New York, London, and Maputo indicate that state officials involved in the loans, including the former minister of finance, the general director of the Mozambican secret services, the director of economic intelligence, several bureaucrats, and the former president's own son, Ndambi Guebuza, pocketed huge sums from the deal. Credit Suisse pleaded guilty in 2021 to defrauding investors, and Senator Elizabeth Warren specifically cited the scandal in a letter to the US Labor Department, requesting that it prohibit the bank from handling retirement funds in the United States. In Mozambique, 19 individuals are currently on trial for alleged involvement in the scam—though it is unlikely that any powerful politicians will be convicted.

NORTHERN INSURGENCY, FOREIGN ENTANGLEMENTS

In October 2017, a wave of insurgent attacks erupted in Cabo Delgado. Referred to locally as al-Shabaab (though there is no apparent connection to al-Shabaab in Somalia), the insurgent movement has been burning villages, killing residents, displacing communities, and destroying crops for the past five years. After an especially dramatic attack on the coastal town of Palma in March 2021, French transnational oil company TotalEnergies suspended its $20 billion liquified natural gas project there; Exxon has indefinitely delayed its own investment. A vigorous debate has taken place regarding the root causes of the conflict in Cabo Delgado, but there is no doubt that economic precarity and impoverishment have facilitated its spread.

If the reach of the state is "thick" in the southern capital of Maputo, it is "thin" in Cabo Delgado. For decades, this northern province has been a smugglers' paradise. Illegal immigrants from Somalia, Kenya, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Tanzania, and even Niger and Thailand are involved in the trafficking of timber, rubies, gold, and refugees, apparently with the complicity of high-level Mozambican officials. Several cities and ports along the coasts of Cabo Delgado and Nampula, the province just to its south, are also key corridors for the trafficking of drugs such as heroin. Originating in Afghanistan, heroin is sent overland to Pakistan and shipped by sea to northern Mozambique. It is then transported by road to South Africa, where it is either consumed or exported to Europe.

Some observers have speculated that the development of gas projects threatens these lucrative networks and trade corridors, and that the conflict is an attempt to protect or capture the drug trade. But the trafficking networks have already moved south. The real problem is that the inability of weak state institutions to enforce the rule of law or promote development, as well as their lack of interest in doing either, has enabled the growth of the insurgency.

Simmering local grievances over exclusion, unemployment, and poverty cannot be ignored.

Investments in gas as well as gemstone mining projects have led to the forcible displacement and resettlement of residents who mainly depended on fishing or artisanal and small-scale gem mining for their livelihoods. Although these perilous conditions may not have precipitated the conflict, they have fueled it. To recruit fighters, the leaders of the insurgency denounce government corruption and tap into the frustrations of young, rural Mozambicans over economic insecurity, attracting locals by promising better living conditions than what is offered by the Frelimo government. But insurgents have also pledged to implement Sharia law and appear to have links to the Islamic State of Central African Province. This has raised fears, especially in the West and in southern Africa, that the movement mostly comprises extremists who want to establish an Islamic state.

Instead of fostering local development projects that might address the underlying drivers of conflict, powerful politicians initially ignored the unrest while continuing to line their own pockets. As the attacks spread, the government resorted to a variety of mercenaries to restore order, including the Wagner Group from Russia and DAG, a South African private military company. Neither they nor Mozambique's own armed forces made much headway; in fact, some of the military's efforts at counterinsurgency have deepened local grievances.

The discovery of gas has shifted the center of gravity to the north.

Fearing that the insurgency could spread beyond Mozambique's borders, the security council of the South African Development Community (SADC) agreed to deploy troops to the country, a longtime member. While arrangements for their arrival were being made, however, Nyusi signed a secret bilateral arrangement with President Paul Kagame of Rwanda to deploy about 2,400 Rwandan troops, more than double the number of the SADC contingent, to assist Mozambican forces in fighting the insurgents.

Members of SADC, especially South Africa and Botswana, have raised concerns about the growing influence and involvement of Rwanda in the region. Observers believe that Kagame is also using the intervention as an opportunity to try to silence his opponents, some of whom are in exile in southern Africa. A leading Rwandan opposition leader, the former intelligence chief, and a former army chief were all murdered in South Africa between 2010 and 2014. In Mozambique, a Rwandan journalist who had directed the Christian radio station Amazing Grace in Kigali, and was a critic of Kagame's policies, was abducted in May 2021 and has not been seen since. Four months later, the vice president of the Association of Rwandan Refugees in Mozambique (ARRM) was killed. He was a former officer in the Rwandan army.

About 4,000 Rwandan refugees live in Mozambique; half of them reside near Maputo. According to the ARRM, refugees have grown increasingly fearful following the disappearances and murders, and some are leaving. The appointment of Claude Nikobisanzwe as Rwanda's high commissioner in Mozambique has intensified those fears. Prior to his appointment, Nikobisanzwe was expelled from South Africa due to allegations that he was involved in the killing of Rwanda's former intelligence chief.

Regardless of whether the immediate causes of conflict in northern Mozambique involve drug cartels and smuggling corridors, the expansion of Islamic extremism, local grievances, or all of those factors together, the situation appears to have entangled Mozambique in larger, more complex transnational and regional geopolitical rivalries from which it will not easily extricate itself. Multinational companies that have already invested in natural gas are playing a "wait and see" game, pushing anticipated returns into the future (though they may change their minds given the spike in natural gas prices owing to Russia's invasion of Ukraine). The mercenaries and allies on which Mozambique depends to fight al-Shabaab will also expect to be paid, with either political or economic favors. If gas revenue actually materializes, the question is whether any of it will reach ordinary Mozambicans.

CREATIVE RESISTANCE

Across Africa, people have participated in civil society organizations and social movements to protest threats to their well-being from land grabbing, the destructive environmental impact of mining, the failure of governments to provide reliable and affordable access to basic public services, and lack of security. In Mozambique, civil society, nongovernmental organizations, activists, journalists, critics, and ordinary people are speaking out about their circumstances, too.

Local communities that have been displaced by coal extraction or biofuel projects have blocked transport corridors and held impromptu demonstrations intended to force companies and the government to honor their rights or offer greater compensation. The founder of Justiça Ambiental, a Mozambican environmental group, has loudly protested human rights violations and environmental degradation associated with gas exploration, demanding immediate termination of the projects. Civil society organizations such as the Center for Public Integrity, the Center for Democracy and Development, the Budget Monitoring Forum, and the Mozambican branch of the Media Institute of Southern Africa have documented and denounced corruption, cronyism, secret deals, hidden debts, and violations of journalistic freedoms.

Presently, these efforts are too easily suppressed by the exercise of state power. Although Article 51 of the Constitution guarantees citizens "the right to freedom of assembly and demonstration, within the terms of the law," the ruling party has effectively prohibited most demonstrations, and security forces have used live ammunition to disperse protesters. Activists who try to organize protests have been charged with threatening state security. Journalists have risked and lost their lives to investigate the individuals and networks engaged in illicit financial flows or drug smuggling.

Fearing the repercussions of engaging in overt criticism, most Mozambicans avoid protests and grumble about conditions in the privacy of their own homes. Together with the perception that elections are rigged, this severely circumscribes the possibilities for holding the government accountable. Foreign "partners" either turn a blind eye or have been distracted by other issues, such as resurgent authoritarianism, the debilitating effects of the COVID-19 pandemic in their own countries, and, as of this writing, the horrific humanitarian crisis unfolding in Ukraine. At the end of the day, ordinary Mozambicans may have to intensify their own creative efforts to realize their hopes for democracy, security, and well-being in Mozambique. ■

> "Nairobi is flipping the script on the role and place of the African city with regard to technological innovation and production in the digital age."

Nairobi's Rise as a Digital Platform Hub

PRINCE K. GUMA

The evolution of digital and prepayment platforms in sub-Saharan Africa has brought about some of the most exciting innovations the region has seen. Underlying this innovation space has been the consolidation of both transformative and disruptive changes in infrastructure reform, digital technology, and urban development. Digital and prepayment platforms have attained a critical role in the provision and supply of utility services as they have been incorporated and domesticated, in the process of being converted to situational and local preferences. They have come to suit the needs and goals of different systems and utilities in the delivery of basic goods and services.

In Kenya's capital, Nairobi, these platforms have inspired dynamic transformation as well as disruption of the technoscape, ultimately changing the city both by linking people to banking and other services, and by improving service delivery instruments and the capacities of informal economies and housing. Digital and prepayment platforms are shaping varied connections, networks, encounters, and forms of copresence and coexistence within the city, bypassing standard and conventional evolutionary paths of urban development and transformation.

By leapfrogging its way to smart, mobile, and flexible ways of development, without needing to follow the trajectory of cities from the highly cited models of the global North, Nairobi is flipping the script on the role and place of the African city with regard to technological innovation and production in the digital age. This should provoke us to extend our outlooks toward—and dialogues around—different kinds of "smart urbanism" and trajectories of technological development.

M-PESA'S IMPACT

While relatively recent, digital and prepayment platforms represent one of the most intriguing developments of technology appropriation and domestication in Nairobi. Take the case of M-Pesa ("M" is for mobile and "Pesa" is Swahili for money). Piloted by Kenya's leading mobile service operator, Safaricom, in October 2005, M-Pesa was initially launched as a branchless banking service for women's informal cooperatives (also known as *chama*). The idea was to enable women to conveniently access and pay for laundry services on a monthly basis. The pilot consisted of eight agent stores in three geographically dispersed locations: the Nairobi Central Business District (a well-developed urban center), Mathare (an informal settlement in Nairobi), and Thika (a semi-urban constituency 32 kilometers outside the city).

Whether due to subversion or convenience, the pilot gave rise to unanticipated usages, and complications arose with Faulu, the partnering microfinance institution. Of the 500 or so clients in the test groups who had enrolled for the pilot and received free mobile phones that came with free Kenyan shillings in the form of "mobile money," many were using the service for person-to-person (P2P) transfers to send money instantly among themselves. Some were also using M-Pesa for business purchases and savings, or for sending mobile airtime credit purchased via M-Pesa to their friends and relatives up-country. Others were using M-Pesa to repay the loans of others, generally as a means of settling a secondary transactional obligation. In such ways, the pilot's reception was rather subdued, barely meeting its intended objectives or expectations.

These results prompted a halt to the pilot and the eventual redesign and relaunch of M-Pesa in March 2007 as a money transfer service designed to let users "send money home." Since then, M-Pesa has opened up to further incremental

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improvisations. The platform has expanded well beyond its original conception in the pilot stage as a mechanism for the repayment of microfinance loans. Apart from providing microfinance loan disbursal and withdrawal, remittance delivery, and other money transfer services, it has developed into a much larger ecosystem of mobile payments. Its functions now include facilitating payment for and access to critical utility services and systems among all demographics in urban, periurban, and rural Kenya.

Today, M-Pesa increasingly serves as a virtual repository for cash, enabling payment for a wide array of goods and services. Its increased affordances and usages have turned the platform into a crucible of innovation, taking center stage in everyday life. As of 2022, M-Pesa controls 98 percent of the country's mobile money market. This success has led to the emergence of a myriad of other platforms with similar infrastructural logic.

Over the years, M-Pesa has become one of Kenya's greatest success stories in technological innovation. The trajectory of its rise and sprawl is not an isolated example, but one that can be generalized across Nairobi's technoscape, where innovations, technologies, and infrastructures tend to be highly shaped by path-dependent and social and contextual realities. M-Pesa's unintended, improvised, and informal usages and affordances have become symbolic of the diffusion and appropriation of the mobile phone in the city, and in Africa at large. Not only does M-Pesa demonstrate how the appropriation of the mobile phone in Kenya has diverged from what is assumed to be the global standard, but it also illustrates how its diffusion has been marked by the deployment of ordinary and ephemeral infrastructural arrangements.

The M-Pesa platform is a crucible of innovation, taking center stage in everyday life.

Two examples in the matrix of emergent mobile-based arrangements stand out. The first is what was popularly known in the Kenyan daily parlance of the early 2000s as *simu-ya-jamii*. Introduced in 2003 by Safaricom, simu-ya-jamii was a community service: a mobile phone typically nested in a structure configured like a telephone booth, and attended by an agent. Since the simu-ya-jamii kiosks were deployed when mobile phones first appeared in Kenya and were exorbitantly priced, they are commonly remembered to have played a significant role in preparing the minds of Kenyans for the mobile age.

The second example, M-Pesa stalls, are increasingly abundant in Kenya, a country where up to 80 percent of transactions for basic goods and services are mediated through similar kiosks distributed across the country's urban regions and cities. M-Pesa stalls are materially similar to simu-ya-jamii, also borrowing from phone booth design. The M-Pesa stalls in Nairobi are typically green boxes assembled from repurposed wood and metal.

The stalls, in an aesthetic sense, display limited contiguity to notions of seamless functioning, precision, or completion. They are not permanently structured in the sense of being intact, solid, concrete, and immutable. Yet they constitute alternate modes for leapfrogging grid infrastructures and bypassing infrastructural vulnerabilities, inadequacies, and absences in the fragmented city.

Such stalls and kiosks have come to represent the growth and development of mobile telephony in Nairobi, foregrounding the ways in which technological infrastructures are shaped by the specifically situated settings of urban life. They mirror the empirical trajectory of this growth and development; their distribution covers several parts of urban regions in Kenya, including Nairobi. The M-Pesa stalls have been essential in facilitating everything from money transfers to deposits and savings, microfinance disbursement, and remittance delivery.

Beyond acting as mobile providers' dealerships and as nonbank financial entities, the agents and vendors who operate the green structures handle registration for new customers on the platform. In low-income neighborhoods, these structures also serve as everyday convenience shops for basic items such as phone chargers, batteries, and other interchangeable parts.

The M-Pesa stalls remain prototypical as crucibles of social ingenuity, in part by inspiring newer iterations and renovations. A case in point is the automated kiosks located within corridors or on the pavements of some of Nairobi's large shopping centers. They serve as "points of sale" for different kinds of mobile payment services, including for water and electricity utility bills, mobile phone credit purchases, and the like. These kiosks, without any need for an attendant, have become the default service for many Nairobians, in preference to earlier outlets such as simu-ya-jamii kiosks and M-Pesa stalls.

Despite the rise of such automated systems in the city, M-Pesa remains at large in Nairobi. Its stalls' operations reflect both individualistic and communal elements of mobile technology, a combination of public and private culture. Strongly representative of a technological transition to the digital age, they continue to shape lifestyles, perceptions, and imaginings of potentialities for change and reinvention through mobile telephony. Their visibility as ostensibly patchy, scrappy, basic artifacts of the digital transition illustrates the heterogeneous and transient state of urban technological infrastructures in Nairobi.

Overall, the story of M-Pesa demonstrates technological adaptability and reinterpretation. It offers a vivid example of how the telecommunications industry in Kenya and Africa at large has expanded its scale without necessarily following—but rather leapfrogging—the standard trajectory of the global North. The industry has moved beyond basic voice and communication services, providing wireless connectivity and mobile-based platforms that have become the sine qua non for the provision of critical services. This process shows how the exponential advancement of mobile phone–based technologies in African cities depends on incremental changes and adjustments that resonate with the contingent nature of urban infrastructure and technology.

REVOLUTIONIZING INFRASTRUCTURE PROVISION

As is the case in many African cities, service provision in Nairobi is highly splintered. Public utility companies are notorious for being inequitable, exclusive, and ill-run. They provide predominantly "premium" services for urban elites, often leaving millions of people in marginalized areas lacking access to basic systems and services. Many people remain either completely without water and electricity service, or at least facing sporadic difficulties with access. This state of exception has come to constitute a more generalized mode of urbanization in the informal areas of the city, where populations rely on a multitude of informal connections or providers. Such dynamics have come to define infrastructure provision in the digital age.

The earliest attempts to incorporate digital platforms into infrastructure provision in Nairobi date back to the mid-1990s. In the water and electricity sectors, they culminated in the reformulation of the utilities' mission statements by the early 2000s. This led to their adaptation of digital platforms to business processes and the creation of departments to provide digital and mobile-based options to customers.

The Nairobi City Water and Sewerage Company established a directorate tasked with overseeing its integration of mobile technologies and platforms to automate and digitize its processes. The utility adopted digital platforms for issuing invoices, control of purification processes, and management of bill payments, user records, and water flows. Meanwhile, the Kenya Power and Lighting Company appropriated digital platforms for functions including customer service, complaint handling, documentation management, and payment and querying systems. Platforms that became commonly used for transacting business included the Internet, email, and SMS text messaging.

With these institutional transformations, public utilities' aptitude and appetite for mobile-based platforms grew. This led to a coalescing of systems to allow computerization of records and automation of billing, deposits, and (re)connection charges and fees.

Despite these initial attempts at integrating digital platforms in Nairobi's water and electricity sectors, it was not until the mid-2000s that the architecture of platform-based water and electricity supply began to sprawl. Seeking infrastructural renewal, the utilities began to modify their systems by embracing new technologies to meet the growing needs and expectations of their users. These processes were especially accelerated by the rise of the mobile phone and the deployment of new technologies spearheaded by mobile telecommunications networks.

Kenya Power set up a series of mobile-based transaction systems starting in 2006, aiming to digitize billing and revenue collection. It offered options to consumers for checking and querying their electricity account balances, as well as access to payment options, through the various mobile platforms.

However, it was the inauguration of M-Pesa in March 2007 that offered a more sustainable platform for a mobile billing system, becoming the basis for digital innovation. Since M-Pesa's emergence, mobile phone–based technologies have become popular for purposes such as purchasing services, making payments, and settling water and electricity bills. These have predominantly taken the form of simple mobile-phone text-based services and applications that do not require users to have sophisticated devices. Both Kenya Power and Nairobi City Water have integrated M-Pesa systems and applications into their infrastructure provision processes.

As M-Pesa's functionality has expanded, it has evolved well beyond primary person-to-person payments (such as between friends without bank accounts). The platform made it possible, with a basic mobile phone, to make real-time payments through customer-to-business channels. Launched in April 2009, this facility marked the emergence of a standardized payments system for the provision of critical services, including mobile banking, acquisition payments, airtime top-up, or settling water and electricity bills. This was also the beginning of direct partnerships between telecoms and power and water distributors.

Thus, in nomadic and migratory fashion, M-Pesa quickly became one of the most dominant payment facilities in the water and electricity sectors. It soon developed into a network infrastructure and platform for public utility systems, facilitating financial transactions. Subsequently, other mobile telecom operators, such as Airtel (with Airtel Money), also joined the market, providing more options for mobile-based payments for critical utilities.

Nairobi has become a seedbed for major clusters of technological development projects.

Since the late 2000s, different innovations with multiple (re)configurations, goals, and characteristics have emerged in business-to-business platforms, and for person-to-government (and vice versa) transactions. The Nairobi technoscape has expanded well beyond public utilities to include private-sector players; new actors and industry partnerships have become common. This has led to a shift past billing-focused initiatives, toward a new generation of mobile and system-based innovations, including nominally public and de facto public–private projects.

These systems range from clean energy provider M-Kopa Solar to mobile lending and investment platforms for mobile devices. Start-ups include M-Maji (for mobile access to clean and safe water), M-Kazi (for mobile recruitment), and M-Prep (an SMS-based tutorial platform). Other systems include targeted infrastructure projects such as rent-to-own solar power products. Even in governance and planning processes, many initiatives and projects operate on a wide range of applications, seeking to leverage mobile technology to improve civic engagement. One example is Ushahidi, a crowd-mapping open-source system that exposed election killings in 2008.

The traditional model in which individual companies owned absolute control of critical functions in their sectors is being challenged by new ways of doing business, new supply models, and new players and competitors that focus on small segments of the value chain. Telecommunications operators that traditionally offered no more than basic voice or data connections now offer blurred and hybrid services, opening up the sector to exotic interdependencies and collaborations. This has become a catalyst for innovations and technologies that enable efficient, effective, and equitable supply and payment for critical services.

The development and growth of digital platforms and infrastructure have led to the expansion of an entire ecosystem of companies and institutions converging around information and communication technologies, facilitating a mobile-based economy. It has also led to the proliferation of hybrid systems.

M-Pesa, notably, has become the backbone for the transmission, supply, and sale of water and electricity services. Beyond utilities, M-Pesa has inspired a wide range of innovative projects that leverage encrypted messaging capacity targeting urban inhabitants, especially at the peripheries of the city. Examples include M-Farm, a market platform for agricultural buyers and sellers, and mHealth Kenya, for private–public health service provision. M-Pesa has also inspired a wide range of small- to large-scale start-ups, co-working spaces, and regional and continental technology development firms and incubation hubs.

It has become counterproductive to examine individual companies, systems, or sectors as separate actors with discrete interests; they are becoming increasingly interdependent, clustering around digital platforms that partly dictate or animate their functionality. Digital and prepayment platforms have reconfigured different kinds of service providers, establishing symbiotic and mutually reinforcing relationships between social and technological systems. The mobile phone is enabling these innovations. Service providers that used to function as monopolies—rigid and inflexible organizations that adopted conventional and orthodox approaches to technology, economics, planning, and service delivery—have shifted toward innovation and fluidity in their operations and in their provision of critical services in the age of telecom-mediated platforms.

The incremental deployment of these applications has facilitated automated and self-service systems that allow users, particularly in the underserved and unserved settlements of the city, to read their meters, download their bills, recharge water and electricity credit cards and tokens, and purchase rent-to-own digital water meters and power products, among other things. Rather than helping to overcome long-standing inequalities of service provision, however, these digital technologies have heightened disparities, often leading to a range of complex relations and political contestations between different groups.

EMERGENT CLUSTERS

Over time, this plethora of mobile systems and technologies has become interwoven throughout the social and material fabric of everyday life. M-Pesa and similar digital and prepayment platforms in Nairobi have stimulated the unprecedented growth of an entire ecosystem of companies and institutions concentrating on the digital economy. As new digital infrastructure and consortia have evolved, Nairobi has become a seedbed for major clusters of technological development projects.

The first cluster includes prepaid metering technologies for the provision of water and energy services in contested urban spaces characterized by high population densities and lack of access to basic state infrastructure. These technologies integrate M-Pesa and similar platforms to enable digital prepayment and crediting facilities. They have become critical as technological fixes for the challenges of infrastructure provision, making it easier for municipal utilities to expand services, but also offering an opportunity for utilities to penetrate low-income areas and cost-effectively extend centralized networks.

The second cluster involves the infusion of digital technologies and data-driven platforms to create the automated pathways and business modalities of hybrid infrastructure. One such example is the self–meter-reading water project, a business model best known in the region as pay-as-you-go. The service is paid for before or as it is used.

"Water ATMs" are another example of this cluster: self-operated kiosks that dispense water in return for cash payment or sometimes a prepaid card. They were launched as a public-private partnership between Nairobi City Water and Grundfos Lifelink, a private Danish water engineering company. This kind of market-based solution hinges on the idea of social entrepreneurship and universalization of piped network coverage. But it does not necessarily reflect a good understanding of the socio-political context in which the new technology is being introduced.

These and similar projects are key to the expansion of basic goods and services provision through digital technologies. As such, they generate dynamic and hybrid infrastructural constellations, as actors on different levels constantly appropriate and modify these predesigned systems. These processes highlight the potential for infrastructural change and remaking through digital platforms within urban informal settings.

The third cluster comprises self-contained enclaves and entirely new cities on the periphery of Nairobi. These include eco towns, smart towns, and satellite towns, integrating digital infrastructure such as smart grids, green buildings, and multimodal transport networks. Take the case of Konza Techno City, a satellite city south of Nairobi that is currently under construction, at a snail's pace. Its design calls for combining high-tech digital interventions with infrastructure development to address urban problems of housing, service provision, and governance.

Developments like Konza Techno City, promising "smart city" living for the middle and upper classes, are manifestations of urban entrepreneurialism in Nairobi and its region. These large-scale, master-planned developments reveal a technocratic, top-down mentality. They demonstrate the speculative nature of private sector–led digital infrastructure projects with "world-class city" aspirations. Such projects may exacerbate existing problems, including spatial inequality and environmental degradation.

Finally, the fourth cluster comprises the digital mobility and delivery platforms that have gained local appeal over time, but even more so during the COVID-19 pandemic. Motorcycle-based food-delivery services have become especially popular during the pandemic, as curfews and other restrictions on movement during lockdowns led to an increase in demand. The deep market penetration of smartphone products and applications has made the proliferation of digital mobility and delivery platforms a phenomenon across the city, shaping demand-responsive transport services in the process. More residents are opting to have meals, groceries, and parcels delivered straight to their households.

Given increasing urbanization in Kenya, it is safe to assume that motorcycle-based food delivery and other door-to-door services will only continue to grow in the near future. Such platforms have become increasingly common, as more players join the ecosystem, from food companies and restaurants to transport networks and e-logistics companies.

These examples demonstrate how Nairobi is being changed by digital and prepayment platforms. They also show how connections, networks, encounters, and forms of coexistence now materialize within the city, bypassing standard and conventional evolutionary adoption paths of urban development and transformation. Nairobi is leapfrogging its way to smart, mobile, and flexible ways of development, without needing to follow the models of the global North.

SMART URBANISM BEYOND THE WEST

With the spread of new and emerging technologies in Nairobi, digital and prepayment platforms have become an ingrained part of day-to-day life, helping residents navigate cityscapes and bypass infrastructure vulnerabilities. Many parameters of urban life have been radically changed by mobile phones and Internet connections, the appropriation of relatively simple, text-based applications, and services such as mobile money accounts. This host of technological innovations has been spurred by an expansive complex of new software development firms, sustained by connections to global investors.

In all these ways, Nairobi is flipping the script on the role and place of the African city, becoming a site of both consumption and production of new imaginaries, visions, and technologies. Within the past decade, these technologies and platforms have become key signifiers of Nairobi's identity as a digital platform city in the making; a regional center of growth and development of mobile telephony; and a hub of software development, smart infrastructure projects, and the mobile money market. Nairobi has gained a reputation as one of the smartest cities in the region, or even the world, becoming known as Africa's "Silicon Savannah."

These articulations of smart urbanism are to be understood not through standard Western frameworks, but within the specific context of the informality and improvisation characteristic of an African megacity and its infrastructure. Nairobi's digital and prepayment platforms provoke us to extend our outlooks and dialogues toward modes of smart urbanism and trajectories of technology development that may exceed the modernity of Western models. ■

> **“[D]espite the promise and notable gains of disability law, policy, and activism, the material circumstances of the vast majority of disabled Ugandans have not significantly changed in the past few decades.”**

Disability Rights and Wrongs in Uganda

TYLER ZOANNI

Disability and Equality
Ninth in a series

“Uganda’s disability journey,” as scholars Julie Abimanyi-Ochom and Hasheem Mannan have described it, is justly celebrated. The country has ratified some of the most progressive disability laws and policies in the world, and it is home to a robust disability activist movement. Disability is also highly visible in mass media and public life. At the same time, however, these gains in laws, activism, and publicity have not significantly changed the lives of most disabled Ugandans. In some respects, they even further marginalize the needs and concerns of Uganda’s most marginalized disabled people.

In this way, Uganda offers a story of disability rights and wrongs, a turn of phrase I borrow from disability studies scholar Tom Shakespeare. I recount this story here because it is striking and important in its own right, and because of what it illuminates about the paradigms that dominate disability politics and activism today. Such dominant approaches thoroughly reflect the traditions of political liberalism from which they have emerged: they espouse a disability politics focused on principles like individual rights, autonomy, and self-determination, and they are grounded in laws and policies as the basis for social change. This is true in many places, but the case of Uganda brings into glaring relief what a disability rights paradigm can and cannot do.

RIGHTS

First, what is right about disability rights in Uganda? The answer is: quite a bit. The constitution recognizes disabled people’s rights as such—that is, as the constitutional rights of disabled people to respect and dignity—and this remains unusual.

Uganda has ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, and it has enacted anti-discrimination laws guaranteeing disabled people’s access to education, community life, employment, physical space, and more. The Ugandan Parliament has five seats reserved for disabled people. Every level of government has mandated representation of disabled people, stretching down to local councils at the village level.

In addition, the central government features a number of disability-focused offices and initiatives, most notably the National Council for Disability, which monitors rights and guides policymaking. All children in Uganda have a right to primary and secondary education, and this includes disabled children. To facilitate the education of disabled children, Uganda has established a national special educator training program, as well as a mix of integrated, mixed, and segregated schools for disabled students.

Alongside state efforts, disability plays a vibrant role in social and public life in Uganda. This starts with disabled persons’ organizations, which date back to the 1970s and include groups led by people with physical impairments, Deaf and Blind people, and people with albinism. All of these groups meet under the auspices of an active umbrella organization, the National Union of Disabled Persons of Uganda, which was founded in 1987. Uganda is also home to numerous nongovernmental organizations focusing on disability services, rehabilitation, economic and social development, and the arts and cultural life, all for disabled people. Disability is a common topic across newspapers, radio, and television; media

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consumers in Uganda frequently encounter disability-focused talk shows, programs, and series.

All of this amounts to Uganda's disability "rights" in two senses—both in the sense of a progressive disability politics and in the sense of specific legal entitlements to education, political participation, and social integration. Uganda's disability rights in this double sense are remarkable in any case, but especially so in light of the considerable challenges the country has faced. Nearly 42 percent of Ugandans live below the international poverty line, the vast majority of people rely on subsistence agriculture, and the country was hit hard by the HIV/AIDS epidemic as well as decades of armed conflict and civil war. This broader context simply proves that ambitious and progressive national action with respect to disability is not merely a luxury, nor is it a prerogative of wealthy countries in the global North.

Uganda's disability rights did not come about accidentally, and this, too, bears celebrating. They were built by decades of hard work on the part of Ugandan disability activists, starting in the 1970s. The National Resistance Movement, led by Yoweri Museveni, who has been Uganda's president since 1986, played a central part as well. It made disabled people key targets of an ambitious program of postwar national "empowerment," and committed significant legal and institutional energy to the betterment of disabled Ugandans.

Proverbs emphasize the formidable skills and capacities of disabled people.

REALITIES

The World Health Organization has estimated that roughly 80 percent of the global population of around one billion disabled people reside in the so-called developing world. This raises the question of whether the striking prominence of disability in Uganda is partly demographic. Is disability so prominent in Uganda simply because the country has so many disabled people, compared with other countries? There is not an immediate answer, but it seems likely that the government and activist initiatives are just as important as demographics in a narrow sense, and probably more important.

It is difficult to say whether the country has higher or lower disability rates when compared with countries across the world, within sub-Saharan Africa, or in comparable socioeconomic circumstances. This is because available statistics on disabled Ugandans vary considerably, from estimates as low as 6.5 percent of the population to as high as nearly 18 percent. These divergent estimates almost certainly stem from different survey methods and definitions of disability, ranging from narrow medical construals that focus on impairments, to global public health approaches that emphasize "functions" of daily life, to more critical activist and social scientific definitions that foreground disabling social conditions. That said, it is probably safe to assume that the absolute and relative numbers of disabled people in Uganda are not on the low end of the estimates—regardless of how exactly one defines disability—because of Uganda's history of violence as well as people's limited access to medical care in a context of widespread poverty. But it is equally safe to say that these factors do not by themselves account for the prominent place of disability in contemporary Uganda.

When it comes to Euro-American nation-states, historians have shown that the twentieth century's two world wars produced impairments on a massive scale. The expansion of the welfare state and new categories of entitlement and rehabilitation subsequently made disability a category and concern of public as well as personal life. Put crudely, war and welfare made it possible to be a disabled person, in the sense of making disability a meaningful category of identification and social organization. In turn, disability became politicized alongside other projects of social change starting in the 1960s, providing the basis for new forms of disability activism and civil and human rights movements.

Uganda's disability history has taken a track that converges with this Euro-American history in some respects, but in many others diverges from it. It is true that disability as a category first emerged from welfare initiatives for disabled veterans within colonial Uganda in the wake of World War II. Yet my own reading of the archival files of postwar disability pension claims in Uganda suggests that African claimants rarely succeeded, whereas European colonizers living in East Africa often did.

The late-colonial programs for Deaf and Blind Ugandans run by missionaries and the colonial government likely came closest to anticipating the later, more broadly based disability consciousness. British missionaries and colonial officials viewed Deaf and Blind Ugandans as capable of being productive disabled people, and thus useful parishioners and colonial subjects, if only they were given the proper training and education. These programs, however, did not disseminate a widespread sense of the category of disability as a meaningful term of identity, belonging, or claims-making. This came only later, likely in the 1970s, as disabled Ugandans began to follow and participate in the emergence of a form of global rights activism.

After independence from the British Empire in 1962, the shaky patchwork of incredible ethnolinguistic diversity that the British had stuck together to create Uganda began to fall apart, leading to decades of armed struggle and war in the successive regimes of Milton Obote, Idi Amin, and the Okello brothers. These decades of violent conflict certainly produced many impaired bodies and minds. But this was outside the context of the emergence of formal disability activism in Uganda, which historically was led by people with physical impairments, blindness, and deafness who were not often immediately connected to war or political violence, even though they had lived through such experiences as bystanders and civilians.

Northern Uganda, however, is one part of the country where violent conflict does directly connect to disability in a quite particular way—namely, as a category of humanitarian and NGO intervention. In the 1990s and into the 2000s, this region was the epicenter of fighting between the Ugandan military and the rebel movement known as the Lord's Resistance Army. During the course of this fighting, nearly 2 million people were displaced, and many thousands were kidnapped, injured, tortured, or killed. Alongside high levels of physical and psychological impairment, this violence generated a small industry of state, transnational, and NGO postconflict rehabilitation efforts, many of which focused specifically on disability and disabled people.

Anthropologist Herbert Muyinda studied these efforts, which often supported what he calls "skilling," or training in income-generating skills like tailoring, carpentry, shoemaking, craftmaking, leatherworking, pottery, and metalwork, all intended to enable poor disabled people to make their own lives and livelihoods. This focus on skilling in the context of postconflict northern Uganda did not simply follow the model of early colonial training for Deaf and Blind people. Rather, it reflected a more recent neoliberal turn within humanitarian and developmental efforts—a turn away from providing people in need with direct material assistance, and toward disseminating skills, awareness, and empowerment.

As Muyinda and others have shown, skilling initiatives for disabled Ugandans have had mixed results. They certainly can support basic survival, in the sense of helping the disabled find ways to make enough money to get by. They also provide the basis for entrepreneurial achievements that have the potential to dramatically change a person's circumstances. Even if making and selling clothing, pots, or crafts provides a relatively minimal income, this is not insignificant within the context of individual lives in Uganda. One of the most important factors in the life chances of many disabled Ugandans is not whether they have impairments, but whether they can be economically and socially productive. Nayinda Sentumbwe, a rehabilitation studies scholar, found that Blind people in central Uganda who were able to work could also find partners, raise children, and ultimately lead relatively typical family lives, though this proved easier for men than for women.

In my own work, I have found cases of people who would be diagnosed as having intellectual impairments in many other countries, and likely would be steered into some kind of state-supported living arrangement. But some of these individuals simply went about ordinary menial jobs: driving motorcycle taxis, selling fruits and vegetables, and the like. This does not free such individuals of stigma and discrimination on the part of colleagues, neighbors, and families, as Sentumbwe, anthropologist Susan Reynolds Whyte, and my own work have shown. But being socially and economically self-sufficient does mean that people with impairments can live relatively ordinary lives, in ways that are not significantly diminished or perceived as such.

WRONGS

There are clear limits to "skilling" initiatives, however. They tend to train disabled people for low-paying jobs in markets already oversaturated with similar goods and services. And such a trajectory of skilling, as noted by development studies scholar Christina Nett, reflects the agency and plans of bureaucracies, rather than the wishes, choices, and goals of disabled people themselves. What is more, these interventions frame the project of improving disabled people's lives at the level of individual betterment, rather than in terms of wider social conditions.

In a way, then, these skilling initiatives encapsulate some of the larger problems facing disabled Ugandans—disability wrongs that shadow the success story of disability rights. The problems with such initiatives—the very limited kinds of possibilities these governmental and nongovernmental efforts provide—also suggest a counternarrative to commonplace explanations of the difficulties that disabled people face in Uganda. A great deal of policy, activist, and academic work points to stigma, "cultural" beliefs, ignorance, and attitudes as the causes of unfavorable living conditions, social marginalization, and oppression faced by disabled people in Uganda. Without denying the existence of anti-disability assumptions and biases in Uganda (similar to everywhere else, it bears emphasizing), other attitudes are equally at work.

For example, one encounters frequent human-interest newspaper stories about disabled Ugandans. Some of these are celebratory; others are stories of pity and personal misfortune that end in calls for assistance. In my research in central Uganda, I found that a number of proverbs and traditional sayings emphasize the formidable skills and capacities of disabled people, rather than their limitations. I note this simply to underscore the fact that problems facing disabled Ugandans are not merely attitudinal or cultural, but also political, social, and economic.

Disability policies are often far removed from conditions on the ground.

Skilling efforts may (and the "may" bears emphasizing here) help particular disabled individuals make ends meet, and this is surely important. But such projects do not challenge the fact that an estimated 80 percent of disabled Ugandans (or nearly double the overall percentage among Ugandans in general) live below the poverty line.

Uganda's disability wrongs are further evident when it comes to the country's progressive disability laws, policies, and activism. As disability activist James Anyimuzala notes, much of Uganda's disability legislation exists largely on paper, while many disability programs and policies go underfunded, unfunded, or unimplemented. Activists I met during my research often offered some version of this mordant quip: "Oh yes, we have the best laws in the world. Too bad we don't follow them." Progressive laws and policies readily circulate within a highly rarefied atmosphere of official documents and reports, offices, and initiatives, which may have little to do with the lived realities of disabled people.

Indeed, despite the promise and notable gains of disability law, policy, and activism, the material circumstances of the vast majority of disabled Ugandans have not significantly changed in the past few decades. One can even discern the emergence and entrenchment of substantial socioeconomic inequalities between the vast majority of poor disabled Ugandans and a kind of disability elite, made up of highly educated politicians, activists, lawyers, academics, and other professionals holding well-paying jobs in government, NGOs, and transnational organizations.

Such a stratification is evident in the contrast between the few who are elected to the reserved seats for people with disabilities in Parliament and the many more who are offered the menial prospects of skilling initiatives. One can also detect this stratification in statistics for school attendance. Despite the existence of universal education programs, a 2014 UNICEF study found that only 9 percent of disabled children in Uganda were in any form of school, whether pre-primary, primary, or secondary. This is likely due to the lack of accessible and supportive learning environments, the high cost of fees for private schools to which many people wish to send their children, and the burdensome costs of supplies, uniforms, and transportation, even for government schools that do not require tuition.

In many ways, then, disability policies and interventions are often far removed from conditions on the ground, particularly in rural areas, where the majority of people in Uganda live. In northern Uganda, Muyinda found a critique of what his interlocutors called "groupism," a dismissive gloss on NGO efforts that talked a lot but actually brought few tangible benefits to struggling disabled people. Moreover, the distance between Uganda's progressive disability policies and interventions and ordinary disabled people's lives is evident even outside the successes and failures of various state and NGO efforts.

Thinking of themselves in terms of disability or engaging in disability initiatives is not always a primary concern of many disabled Ugandans. Food, employment, money, and families are often more pressing. Disability, as Susan Reynolds Whyte has shown in a study of elderly disabled people in rural eastern Uganda, both is and is not a priority for individuals at different junctures and moments, a balance that varies considerably over the life course. Such a perspective may well be common among disabled Ugandans outside activist circles, who do not necessarily identify with a paradigm of disability rights and identity. Saying this is not meant in any way to diminish the historical achievements or contemporary importance of disability rights and activism in Uganda; it is simply to note their limits.

RIGHTS, WRONGS, AND BEYOND

Despite many reasons for celebration, one can detect a certain thinness within the project and paradigm of liberal disability politics as it unfolds in Uganda, manifested in its distance from the lives and problems of many ordinary disabled people, who continue to face poverty and significant barriers to access to physical space, social life, education, work, medical care, and political participation. An overly celebratory account of disability rights in Uganda can obscure such problems.

It is important to emphasize that the limits of a liberal disability politics are not unique to Uganda. Within North America, for example, radical disability activists, many of whom are queer and people of color, have developed a paradigm called “disability justice” as an alternative to that of disability rights. Disability justice approaches question the assumption that individualized disability rights and self-determination—touchstones of mainstream disability activism everywhere—are truly emancipatory. In contrast, disability justice advocates call for intersectional coalition-building across diverse social identities and positions, mutual aid, and experiments in interdependent collective living. All of this is intended to support a broader struggle to inaugurate a more just social and political order—a better world for disabled and nondisabled people alike.

Although the vocabulary of disability justice is without question distinctly American, thinkers and activists like Oche Onazi have begun to explore what this perspective might mean and do in African settings. Onazi draws links between disability justice and the importance within African philosophy of the notion of *ubuntu*, which can be translated as “humanity” or “personhood,” but in a way that begins from the fundamental interdependence of all human existence. Ubuntu is regularly invoked within disability activism in Uganda as well as throughout sub-Saharan Africa, and it is used to claim membership in the wider human community.

There is great potential here for an approach to disability politics that is more vigorous and radical than a liberal disability politics, not to mention potentially more meaningful or intuitive in a place like Uganda. But there is a long way to go within mainstream disability activism in Uganda (and anywhere else, for that matter). Counterintuitively, in my own research, I found that the communities that most realized this potential in Uganda, even if incompletely, were far removed from those espousing from either ubuntu or disability justice perspectives—namely, Christian schools and homes for people with cognitive and developmental impairments. These disabled people are precisely those most overlooked by Uganda’s progressive disability laws and robust activist movement. They are nominally recognized in legal and activist conversations, but in practice are largely excluded from both.

One reason Ugandans with cognitive and developmental impairments are excluded from mainstream disability politics in Uganda (and most of the world, in fact) is an ironic or even tragic corollary of a fundamental principle of disability activism: self-representation, summarized pithily by the activist slogan “Nothing about us without us.” This is an important principle, but it has the dangerous capacity to reinforce rather than challenge dominant expectations about what it means to represent oneself, and to be a self in the first place. The notion of self-representation can function as a demand for voice that ends up backgrounding or even excluding people who do not use language or communication in conventional ways. The demand for self-representation thus always risks falling into an ableist trap—an expectation that people be articulate language-users first and foremost.

For this and other reasons, many Ugandans with intellectual and developmental impairments fall outside of mainstream disability activism and politics in Uganda. What little care and advocacy exists is provided by a thin web of Christian organizations, largely Pentecostal and Catholic (on which my research has focused). On the face of it, these organizations are anathema to both liberal disability politics and disability justice critiques. They provide institutional settings where disabled people often live or are schooled at a considerable remove from so-called mainstream settings. They maintain clear distinctions between the disabled students and residents and the nondisabled staff members. Daily life often unfolds according to fairly paternalistic or even infantilizing logic; disabled people are treated as children regardless of their biological age. In such ways, these Christian institutions almost seem like a caricature of all that secular disability activism opposes.

And yet, such Christian efforts enable lives and worlds of disabled people that might be foreclosed otherwise. Such people not only fall outside national disability services and conversations; they are also often excluded from or outright abandoned by their families. Against this background of neglect, even the use of the category of "child," so heavily attacked in Euro-American critiques of the infantilization of disabled people, extends a meaningful category of personhood, which in turn implies that people are deserving of recognition, care, and support.

What is more, these Christian institutions bring disabled and nondisabled people together in relations of care and support over the long term. For example, at a Catholic home where I worked, many people, whether disabled or nondisabled, spent a great deal of time gathered in the living room or on the benches that line the porches of the main compound's house. There they listen to the radio, gossip, joke, or just sit quietly. Days begin, end, and are punctuated by joining together for meals, prayers, and leisure. Efforts like this Catholic home embody a kind of disability politics that is radical in its own right, based not in rights or self-representation, but in presence, interdependence, and life together. This is rare in a place like Uganda; it also runs against the grain of the wider project of "independent" living within liberal disability politics in Euro-American contexts.

One must not romanticize such Christian efforts, but neither should one dismiss them. The thinness of disability rights in a place like Uganda, and arguably everywhere, needs to be thickened with social and material support. Rights and liberal politics alone are not enough, and their rhetorical invocation can actually foreclose the needs and concerns of the most marginalized of disabled people, as certainly happens in Uganda. This is perhaps the key lesson of the story of disability rights and wrongs in Uganda, a country that has achieved remarkable successes in its "disability rights journey." Uganda's experience also underlines the ways that such a journey can and should continue. ■

States of Emergency—The Apartheid Paranoia in South Africa's Lockdown

HLONIPHA MOKOENA

"I'm putting myself back into Level 4 lockdown," my mother emphatically states as we discuss, at the beginning of December, whether we should travel to KwaZulu-Natal for a family gathering. It's already clear that South Africa's number of infections is rising in its fourth wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. Even though the government has kept us on Level 1, my mother is sure that it is best to plan as if we are back on Level 4, the second-most-severe lockdown level.

My mother and I are linked umbilically by apartheid—in the year that I was born, 1976, my mother and her best friend had to flee the burning University of Zululand (colloquially known as Ongoye) on foot, as university students across the country joined in the revolt started by Soweto's high school students. She was already pregnant with me. When the story is retold, it is to emphasize the fact that they didn't even know where they were fleeing to; they were simply following the footpaths that they saw the university's support staff using on their way to and from work. With only the clothes on their backs, my pregnant mother and her friend had to find their way back to Johannesburg by train, an approximately 14-hour journey. Those memories of apartheid's smoke billows and tear-gas chokes are still alive, and could be said to be influencing the behavior of many South Africans, including my mother, under the current State of Disaster regulations.

Historically, the use of emergency powers to quell rebellion first occurred after the Sharpeville Massacre of March 21, 1960. This permitted the government to arrest anti-apartheid activists without trial, and it was followed immediately by the banning of the two most prominent black political organizations—the Pan African Congress and the African National Congress (ANC). It was in the aftermath of Sharpeville that both organizations first considered and then began preparing for an armed struggle against apartheid. This was the period when Nelson Mandela went underground under the *nom de guerre* of "The Black Pimpernel" until his arrest in 1962.

In the period leading up to the 1963–64 Rivonia Trial of Mandela and other ANC activists, the apartheid state modified and honed the meaning of its "anti-terrorism" strategies, and therefore its use of extraordinary powers. It was not until the 1980s, however, that the term "state of emergency" began to apply to all South Africans. In the aftermath of the June 16, 1976, student revolts, the apartheid state found itself beleaguered by the collapse of not only its own authority but the authority of its institutions, especially the Bantustan governments—the supposedly independent and self-governing states created to give African people "independence" outside of "white" South Africa.

In this period, the first state of emergency was declared on July 20, 1985, during P. W. Botha's tenure as prime minister. The imposition of martial law was at first limited to select municipal districts, but as it became clear that the insurrection in the townships was not going to die down, Botha declared a second state of emergency on June 12, 1986, four days before the tenth anniversary of the 1976 student revolt. This was the state of emergency that effectively lasted from 1986 to 1990, when the public and official negotiations between the National Party and the liberation movements began.

Although this is the basic textbook history of the deployment of the term "emergency" in South Africa, there is a much longer and convoluted story about the state's relationship with epidemiology, hygiene, and sanitation, and the use of these "emergencies" to shape the ordering of urban and rural spaces. In a 1977 article that has defined the fields of African and South African history, Maynard Swanson argued for what he termed the

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"sanitation syndrome" and used this concept to explain "slum" demolitions and forced removals. Swanson wrote:

> This "sanitation syndrome" can be traced as a major strand in the creation of urban apartheid. As disease and epidemiology became a widespread societal metaphor during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, other historical changes taking place in South Africa as elsewhere were leading to the evolution of segregationist ideology. In this context the accident of epidemic plague became a dramatic and compelling opportunity for those who were promoting segregationist solutions to social problems.

In the early months of 2020, when it became inevitable that South Africa would follow the choice of other countries and go into a 21-day lockdown, Swanson's 1977 article was revivified and applied to the catastrophe that was unfolding due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In the main, the focus was on the legislation framing the state's response—the deployment of the South African National Defence Force; the imposition of a curfew; the prohibition on the sale of alcohol; the forced closure of businesses such as restaurants and liquor and department stores; and the sudden requirement that every South African had to have a legal domicile, in a country in which vast numbers of residents are either migrant workers or vulnerably housed in informal settlements.

These initial responses to the government's State of Disaster proclamation missed one important point, which is that the government's regulations were—for many South Africans of a certain age—not a novelty but a revival of other such states of emergency. South Africa was already in preparedness mode because of the countless planned and accidental infrastructures that had been put in place by the apartheid governments.

Take, for example, the term "lockdown." Many of South Africa's townships were built to have only one or two points of entry and exit. This means that in order to "lock down" a township, so no traffic can enter or leave, you only need to place roadblocks at these points. Moreover, the apartheid state made segregation aerially visible through the building of humongous eight-lane highways that separated "Black" areas from "Coloured" and "Indian" areas. Each racial group had a designated ghetto, with even working-class white South Africans given their own townships. These infrastructures are still there, which meant that during the COVID-19 lockdowns, the military and the police didn't have to do any actual locking down; black people were already living in locked-down enclaves.

METAPHORS OF MALADY

But the point is not just about the permanence of apartheid infrastructure; it is also about how such infrastructure continues to shape the manner in which South Africans understand "contagion." Thus, despite all the evidence presented by the government to show the prevalence of COVID-19 across the country, there were still many South Africans who spread misinformation claiming that the "people over there" were the ones spreading the virus. The "people over there" were not just black—there were plenty of anonymous WhatsApp recordings of stories about how some white employers were deliberately infecting their black housekeepers with the virus while pretending to not be infected.

The contagion of apartheid is still alive.

It is therefore the contagion of apartheid that is still alive and festering, not just the coronavirus. No amount of public service announcements—print or digital—could abate the unsettling and racialized assumptions about which bodies are more likely to be diseased and which are not. But most important, President Cyril Ramaphosa's government has found itself having to adopt the language and metaphors of its segregationist and apartheid predecessors in order to justify the many levels of lockdown that the country is living through. The paternal care in Ramaphosa's "My fellow South Africans" opening to his routine updates led many to start calling these broadcasts "Family Meetings." More pertinently, Minister of Police Bheki Cele became the face of the state's enduring power with statements such as, "I hear them crying that cops and soldiers are brutal. Not listening to us is brutality."

Metaphorically, it is also possible to read this moment as an enactment of the revolution that never happened. In her 1981 novel *July's People*, Nadine Gordimer created a vision of the future that many white South Africans had been told they had to be afraid of—militarized, angry, and revolutionary blacks invading the quiet, tree-lined streets of suburbia. The narrative revolves around the Smales family—husband, wife, and three small children—who, deciding to flee from the encroaching civil war, choose to "follow" their manservant, July, to his rural home, which up to this point they had never bothered to know about. Although it is not directly about plagues and epidemics, the novel's most touching points are about how the health and well-being of black bodies are evaluated and understood differently from that of white bodies. Gordimer deftly dramatizes the succor that a "poor" black worker is pressed into giving to his white employers—who had, as if by custom, imagined themselves to be his benefactors—as well as the enervating fear that the adult whites lived with, while the white children adapted themselves to their black age-mates.

In July 2021, looting and rioting erupted in Durban and other cities in KwaZulu-Natal and in Gauteng province when the Constitutional Court ruled that former President Jacob Zuma should be arrested and jailed for contempt of court for refusing to testify before the Zondo Commission, which is investigating state capture under his administration. Again, it is not only the violence, chaos, and disorder that matter; it is that almost immediately, South Africans resuscitated the metaphors of malady and contagion. In many affluent suburbs, vigilante and self-protection militias were created and roadblocks were erected to stop the spread of the riotous mobs. South Africans, it seemed, had not exhausted nor been exhausted by the vocabulary of "emergency" bequeathed to us by apartheid's logic.

Commentators have read these events as if they are freshly minted post-apartheid anomalies, whereas in fact the current state of disaster management and the July riots are symbolic expressions of the interregnum or even liminal state wherein the country is neither over nor "post" apartheid. The continuities between apartheid and the present are to be found not in the language of race and racialization but in the social metaphors of disease and mitigation of contagion, and the sociomedical interventions that attempt to arrest it. It is therefore not the menacing presence of an infectious disease that threatens the social fabric, but the fear of the presence of the "Other" that feeds the sanitation syndrome we have inherited. ■

Fighting for Africa

NEMATA BLYDEN

In his acknowledgments in his new book *Born in Blackness*, Howard French pays tribute to his mother, Carolyn, who "took history seriously and wanted her children to do so, too." She succeeded in instilling that lesson. French, a former *New York Times* foreign correspondent, has written a book that would have done his mother proud, one that centers the history of Africa and its people and underscores their contribution to modern world history. For too long, he maintains, the achievements of African-descended people have been erased, marginalized, and distorted. French aims to rectify these distortions, "not only to place Africans and people of African descent in the New World at the center of the history of modernity and its advent, but to depict them as prime movers in every stage of history." He achieves the feat of bringing together multiple historiographies to produce a book accessible to a wide audience.

Born in Blackness: Africa, Africans, and the Making of the Modern World, 1471 to the Second World War
by Howard W. French
(Norton, 2021)

Crucial to this project is his African American heritage—his "Blackness." Squarely positioning himself as a descendant of Africa whose family history connects to his broader narrative, French personalizes global history. From his first visit to Africa as a young man to his explorations in the Caribbean and Latin America, and his deep roots in the American South, he shows us how important this history is—to him, and to our understanding of the modern world.

Although he does not explicitly ask the question posed by the poet Countee Cullen almost a century ago—"What is Africa to me?"—French unmistakably seeks to answer it. The query in Cullen's poem "Heritage" was meant for African Americans. French tells us in myriad ways, throughout the book, what Africa means to him as a Black man. This emerges in his narrative of family—about his African-born wife and her extended kin, his children, his ancestral past—as well as in his descriptions of the distorted ways in which African history was presented to him.

He wants the question to be posed and answered not just by African-descended people. He prompts us to ask, "What is Africa to the world?" Perhaps his most telling sentence simply states that "almost everyone who reads this book is somehow a product of the histories explored here." As we grapple in the United States with legacies of heinous crimes committed against African-descended people, and debate what parts of that history should be taught, his point could not be more timely.

FROM MALI TO MISSISSIPPI

Born in Blackness is a sweeping history that takes us from fourteenth-century western Sudan and the Sahel in Africa to the author's family homestead in Brownland, Virginia. French begins with the Malian king Abu Bakr, who embarked on ambitious sea voyages, and his more famous successor Mansa Musa, who is well known even to third-graders in Virginia public schools for his pilgrimage to Mecca in 1324, spreading gold along the way. This is the jumping-off point for French's challenge to historiographies that have privileged Europeans as the first explorers. A subtheme of the book is about how scholarship on Africa has been ignored by historians of other parts of the world. As French fleshes out the known history of African encounters with Europeans, he urges us to recognize African agency and impact. He outlines the contours of "Black" history beginning in Africa, and delving into passages in the slave trade, enslavement, resistance, and resilience of Africans.

The journey brings us to São Tomé, the island off the coast of West Africa where the first sugar plantations were established, models for later plantations in the Americas. French also takes us

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to Brazil, Barbados, Haiti, and other sites in the Caribbean to underline the importance of enslaved labor in the development of those colonies. Recounting rivalries between Europeans over African territories and for control of African labor, French stresses Africa's role in the success of major European powers in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Without Africans, he muses, "it is hard to imagine a whole chain of familiar historical developments that followed. The New World would not have been made viable anywhere near the extent" that it was.

French takes us finally to the United States, describing how Africans resisted and revolted in Louisiana, showing the conditions and history that birthed the Mississippi Delta blues that his beloved Muddy Waters sang about, and recognizing what he calls, in a chapter title, the "Gifts of Black Folk." He emphasizes the achievements of African Americans like abolitionist writers David Walker and Solomon Northrup, and his own cousin, Simeon Booker, the journalist responsible for showing the image of Emmett Till's battered body in *Jet* magazine. "Blacks," he writes, "have played a leading role in supplying energy, creativity, and moral urgency to the American project from the very outset."

If I find fault with this book, it is in its inattention to women. We are left wondering whether the only Africans pivotal to world history were men. We are not told what roles women of African descent played in the narrative French relates. Where are Queen Nzinga, Nanny of the Maroons, and Yaa Asantewaa? How did Maria Stewart, Ida B. Wells, and Eslanda Robeson contribute to modernity?

Though he leaves much out, what French chronicles in the pages of this book is not new; he builds on the work of scholars in the fields of African and African diaspora history. French is adamant about recognizing their scholarship, going to great pains to name the historians whose work informs the book. Nonetheless, the book is uniquely his. The copious amount of research he has done is a testament to his respect for the historical enterprise.

Historians are not always enamored of journalists writing history. French has long been adept at engaging with history and has a deep respect for the profession. But with his own ability to popularize this knowledge, he illustrates the failure on the part of scholars to make their work more accessible and better known outside the academy. French's tour de force certainly might give historians pause as he beautifully, and with clarity, chronicles five hundred years of history, spanning four continents.

French also intervenes in the growing debates about how American history has been and ought to be taught. *Born in Blackness* asks why certain histories have not been included or are not more prominent in curricula. Throughout the book, French criticizes this willful ignorance. In the process, he contends with scholarship that excluded or sought to discredit the work of African-descended scholars like C. L. R. James and Eric Williams, who showed the important place of Africans in world history. French laments this "long process of diminishment, trivialization, and erasure of Africans and of people of African descent from the story of the modern world," and seeks to correct the record.

What will Americans lose if they come to understand this history as French presents it? What harm will come to children from learning this history in schools? French declares: "I would be remiss if I didn't make clear that the most egregious forms of historical erasure do not involve an assortment of mostly small, former slave-trading or plantation societies scattered around the Atlantic Rim. The most important site of forgetting, by far, has been the minds of people in the rich world." He calls for "rewriting grade school lessons about history," and rethinking "the way we describe and explain the world we all inhabit."

French hopes that recognizing how important African-descended people have been in world history will "transform the way we understand the history." There will be those who argue that he overstates the case for African influence or exaggerates the role played by the continent's people. When we consider the short shrift given to African and African diaspora histories for so long, perhaps he should not be blamed for the vociferous case he makes. French wants to change the narrative, and he presents a persuasive argument. This is vindicationist history in the tradition of W. E. B. Du Bois, Carter G. Woodson, and George Washington Williams, African American scholars who highlighted Black achievement in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. "Fighting for Africans" is the title of a chapter in the book, and that is exactly what French does as he battles for a place for Africans in world history, urging his readers to understand that the continent "has been the linchpin of the machine of modernity."

In 1915, Du Bois wrote: "There are those, nevertheless, who would write universal history and leave out Africa." *Born in Blackness* has ensured that Africa will not be left out. For those who pick up this book, the significance of Africa and its contribution to modernity will be made obvious. ■