

Realism and the Real Cause

of Civil Wars in Africa

A Study of Civil Wars

in Ethiopia and Somalia

Kendall Fennelly

November 19th, 2021

In the 1960s, with the fall of colonialism, there were suddenly newly independent states emerging in Africa. As African states gained their independence, Western powers continued to exert their influence over African affairs. The majority of these newly independent states were not equipped to be stand alone countries. As countries were gaining their independence, Western powers actively worked against strong state building. Their actions against African states included the removal or assassination of Pan-Africanist leaders and instituting state leaders that were pro-Western, and often very corrupt thus weakening the states. Therefore, the states were not designed to be strong.

This was intentional on the part of Western colonial powers so they could continue taking advantage of African states' economies, and natural resources. As a result, many African states began to form underdeveloped economies dependent on Western markets.¹ The international system in Africa was built on random borders drawn by the Western powers during the Scramble for Africa which had previously occurred during the 19th century. These arbitrary borders did not reflect the realities of life on the African continent.² These new international borders divided ethnic groups, and worse, pitted ethnic groups against each other. In turn, this left many of these states grappling with weak economies, ethnic tensions, and fragile regimes and it led to the development of weak states. These weak states were more susceptible to armed conflicts.

¹ Collier, Paul, and Anke Hoeffler. "On Economic Causes of Civil War." *Oxford Economic Papers* 50, no. 4 (1998): 563–73. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3488674>.

Classical realism, as a political theory, theorizes that the state is the primary actor in international affairs. This political lens suggests that the state will act in its best interest and work to prevent external threats. This is a theory that works best to understand intrastate wars which are not as common in Africa compared to other parts of the world, especially Europe. Nonetheless, realism will be applied to African politics which does little to bring comprehension to African affairs. This is because the international system in Africa is different compared to other parts of the world, mainly Europe- which is often viewed as the 'default' system, largely due to Western powers' overwhelming influence. In applying realist political theories to African politics, it becomes clear how much realism fails to conceptualize African international policy and relationships. It also makes clear how realism does not work as an universal theory the way so many Western theorists want it to.

The politics of war are not understood in the context of Africa which leads to a lack of understanding of African state wars. It is understood that wars are often between states and over territory when using realism as a political lens. However, this is a Westerncentric attitude. In 1963, the Organization for African Unity ruled that the colonial borders would remain the same, with the hopes of limiting intrastate wars over territorial disputes. This ruling proved to be significant as it reinforced colonial legacies and ethnic tensions. In contrast, in Africa, there is an overwhelming number of conflicts that happen within the state. This phenomenon inverts the understanding of state wars. There is a significant amount of armed conflict that stems from ethnic or ideological conflicts within state borders.

Many of the overarching themes of civil wars in Africa stem from these states' internal vulnerabilities such as weak economies and fragile governments. Fragile state structures open up opportunities for powerful oppositions to overtake them, creating widespread political instability and conflicts that can have devastating humanitarian effects. In Ethiopia, the causal factors of the civil war included political instability brought on by a coup d'état, and poor living conditions which drove people to radical ideologies, allowing for the emergence of fringe rebel groups. In Somalia, the causal factors of the civil war also included political instability which had been brought on by the war in Ethiopia. The collapse of the central government, the Somali Democratic Republic, was the catalyst for the outbreak of war.³

Paul Collier and Anke Hoeffler argue in their article, "On Economic Causes of Civil War," that civil wars are caused by a group's desire to control the state or secede from the state.⁴ This is demonstrated by both Ethiopia and Somalia's civil wars.

The civil war in Ethiopia broke out in 1974. There was a growing dissatisfaction with the working class people over high unemployment, growing wealth gap and resource disparity. Under the Emperor, the standard of living was steadily declining. While the government attempted to improve the lives of ordinary people, the Emperor's reforms were not effective. The coup d'état in 1974 was the first event that sparked political instability.⁵

³ Menkhaus, Ken (2014) Calm between the storms? Patterns of political violence in Somalia, 1950–1980, *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, 8:4, 558–572, DOI: [10.1080/17531055.2014.949404](https://doi.org/10.1080/17531055.2014.949404)

⁴ Collier, Paul, and Anke Hoeffler. "On Economic Causes of Civil War."

⁵ Fullerton Joireman, Sandra. "Opposition Politics and Ethnicity in Ethiopia: We Will All Go Down Together." *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 35, no. 3 (1997): 387–407. doi:10.1017/S0022278X97002437.

With the fall of the Emperor, a new Soviet-backed government, the Derg, established itself.⁶ However, this government was not more effective in improving the people's lives. The Derg was brutal to its people. In 1984 and 1985, there was a famine that led to the starvation of a large number of Ethiopians.⁷ The government used food aid and resources as a way of coercing people. It was this kind of behavior that angered people and pushed them to create and join rebel groups aimed at removing the regime from power. As such, the Derg's rise to power and subsequent reign were both major contributing factors to the explosion of war in Ethiopia.

There were several rebel groups that contributed to the continuation of the civil war. These groups emerged in opposition to the brutal, single-party regime of the Derg. These groups included the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF), and the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) along with the Western Somali Liberation Front (WSLF).⁸ The ideologies of the rebel groups were drastically different. They found membership mostly along ethnic lines. There were groups that had Communist or socialist motivations and others that were anti-Communist. However, these groups were fighting the Derg which held a Marxist-Leninist ideology, and received funding from the Soviet Union.⁹

⁶ Fullerton Joireman, Sandra. "Opposition Politics and Ethnicity in Ethiopia: We Will All Go Down Together."

⁷ Fullerton Joireman, Sandra. "Opposition Politics and Ethnicity in Ethiopia: We Will All Go Down Together."

⁸ Fullerton Joireman, Sandra. "Opposition Politics and Ethnicity in Ethiopia: We Will All Go Down Together."

⁹ Fullerton Joireman, Sandra. "Opposition Politics and Ethnicity in Ethiopia: We Will All Go Down Together."

The primary goal of many of these groups was to overthrow the Derg.¹⁰ However, they had individual goals outside of the collective group. The EPLF wanted independence from Ethiopia, which they later received. The TPLF wanted independence for Tigrayan, though this later changed to include more of the whole Ethiopian state. In comparison, OLF was often divided over its goals, making it far less effective. Some members wanted to remain a part of Ethiopia while others wanted independence from the state. Some groups found more popularity than others. The EPLF was far more popular of the groups, this reinforced by the idea that the EPLF fought and saw to the establishment of a new state, Eritrea.¹¹

Realism does not fit in with the Ethiopian Civil War. Realism dictates that states will act in their best interest and work to ward off external threats. While the civil war did lead to the establishment of a new state, the Ethiopian state was actively trying to ward off internal threats. The problem with realism is that it suggests the primary threats to a state are external. In Africa, the reality is the threats are often internal due to the pressurized nature of foreign relations in Africa.

The end of the war was marked by the establishment of a new government, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF). The EPRDF has been a moderate success. The violence has decreased in the past couple of decades, but not disappeared. In 2020, there was an outbreak of a second civil war. However, there is still damage remaining. The civil war caused damage to the economy, which had lasting

¹⁰ Fullerton Joireman, Sandra. "Opposition Politics and Ethnicity in Ethiopia: We Will All Go Down Together."

¹¹ Fullerton Joireman, Sandra. "Opposition Politics and Ethnicity in Ethiopia: We Will All Go Down Together."

effects on Ethiopia's development. The civil war also saw the death of an approximated 1.4 million people, mostly from famine and disease largely due to displacement.¹²

The Somali Civil War broke out in the 1980s as a result of a military revolution against the state. The state was already weakened by the Ogaden War with Ethiopia. Prior to the War, the Somali state was under military rule, governed under the ideology of Sayid Barre called "scientific socialism".¹³ During the Ogaden War, Ethiopian forces devastated Somali troops, leaving the Somali military a fraction of its original size and Somali militants and civilians bitter and angry at Ethiopia and their own government. In the end, the state collapsed due to internal political dissent.

Anarchy and violence reigned for years in Somalia with small scale rebel groups vying for control. There were many groups at play in the Somali civil war. Rebel groups spanned the spectrum in ideology and motivation. With so many groups, there was a variety of popular support for the rebels. One such group was the Islamic Courts Union that seized power in Somalia, establishing authority after nearly a decade of anarchy. The ICU established Islamic courts and government that gained the people of Somalia's trust and respect.¹⁴ When it was damaged by United States's intervention in the early 2000s, it angered many Somalis who were Muslim. The US, along with Ethiopia and Kenya among others invaded Somalia in the name of stopping Islamic fundamentalism.¹⁵

¹² Fullerton Joireman, Sandra. "Opposition Politics and Ethnicity in Ethiopia: We Will All Go Down Together."

¹³ Menkhaus, Ken (2014) Calm between the storms? Patterns of political violence in Somalia, 1950–1980

¹⁴ Verhoeven, Harry. (2009) The self-fulfilling prophecy of failed states: Somalia, state collapse and the Global War on Terror, *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, 3:3, 405-425, DOI: 10.1080/17531050903273719

¹⁵ Verhoeven, Harry. (2009) The self-fulfilling prophecy of failed states: Somalia, state collapse and the Global War on Terror,

In the wake of the removal of the Islamic Courts Union, the West's worst nightmare appeared in the form of a radical organization called Al-Shabaab. Al-Shabaab quickly garnered notoriety for its brutal war tactics and mass killings, particularly of African Union soldiers.¹⁶ In contrast to the Islamic Courts Union, the now well-known group, Al-Shabaab, was and is an organization that villainizes the West and Western intervention. Realism would suggest that the West and Al-Shabaab would attempt war with each other. However, realism is once again subverted when applied to African foreign politics. The primary actor in Somalia is not the state. Al-Shabaab controls a sizable piece of the country, and even more so controls the minds of many of the people which can prove to be far more dangerous. Al-Shabaab does not try to confront the West, particularly the United States head-on the way realism would suggest. Instead, the group works to strike fear in the minds of the West and seeks to control the region surrounding it on the Horn of Africa.

There is an added damage connected to civil wars that Paul Collier points out in his book, "Why the Poorest Countries Are Failing and What Can Be Done about It," that states that are damaged by civil wars lose economic progress which hinders their development. Collier argues that this, in turn, creates a trap that perpetuates more armed conflict.¹⁷ He argues in his book for Western economic intervention as a way of alleviating the economic burden of African civil wars. This is a weak argument. Western intervention is rarely successful in establishing well-working, long-lasting solutions in the developing country.

¹⁶ Verhoeven, Harry. (2009) The self-fulfilling prophecy of failed states: Somalia, state collapse and the Global War on Terror,

¹⁷ Collier, Paul. The Bottom Billion : Why the Poorest Countries Are Failing and What Can Be Done about It, Oxford University Press USA - OSO, 2007. ProQuest Ebook Central.

It is difficult to measure the successes of the rebel groups given that the war is ongoing. However, there is a clear loss with the rise of a fundamentalist group that has killed and terrorized hundreds of thousands of people on the Horn of Africa. There have been marked and cautious victories for Somalia since the establishment of a semi-centralized government in the early 21st century.

One of the marked similarities between the Ethiopian and Somali civil wars was the significance of political instability. Prior to the outbreak of both wars, there was a clear demonstration of weak governments losing control within the state. In the case of Ethiopia, the coup against the Emperor was a clear indicator of a failing state. The introduction of the Berg, a party that seized power in the fallout of the coup, rather than earned power through legitimate means, exacerbated the political instability.

In Somalia, there was a deep history of political violence against the state and its citizens both committed by and against the state and its citizens themselves. This deep web of political violence against each other in Somalia creates a culture of violence and destruction.¹⁸ This is not a productive form of politics. It has devastating and long lasting effects.

In conclusion, the common causal factors of civil wars in Africa were often political instability and fragile state structures, and economic stagnation. These civil wars were often the consequences of colonialist practices. Colonialism left the newly-established states weak and vulnerable to internal conflict.

¹⁸ Menkhaus, Ken (2014) Calm between the storms? Patterns of political violence in Somalia, 1950–1980.

In the case of Ethiopia, the civil war that lasted from 1974 until the 1990s, was caused by internal political instability, economic stagnation, and the emergence of radical rebel groups. The rebel groups were Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF), and the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) along with the Western Somali Liberation Front (WSLF). In the end, the civil war ended up causing lasting destruction, and killed over 1 million people. With the end of the civil war, there was also the establishment of the new government run by the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) as well as the establishment of a new state called Eritrea.

In the case of Somalia, Ethiopia's neighbor, the civil war was started because of Ethiopia's own instability and the effects of the Ogaden War, which in turn made Somalia more unstable. As a result of that, Somalia had the outbreak of a full on civil war which started because of military dissent. The primary rebel group in Somalia to note is Al-Shaabab, a radical Islamic fundamentalist group that emerged in the wake of the collapse of Islamic Courts Union. The commonality between these two civil wars, along with many other civil wars in Africa, was the political instability that allowed for the outbreak of such catastrophic wars.

What is compelling is that these civil wars end in similar fashions. The civil war in Ethiopia ended with a fragile solution that deteriorated later with the start of the second civil war at the end of 2020. The civil war in Somalia is still ongoing with only the beginnings of a solution that has been seen before and failed before now. Collier explains it well in his book, there is a conflict trap that pulls developing countries, particularly in the Global South, down and creates conditions over and over again that

perpetuate political violence. It is important to note that the root cause of these civil wars is truly underdevelopment. It is a lack of strong state that creates the conditions for civil war.

However, it must be understood that this destructive underdevelopment is the result of colonialism. Colonialism left the Global South weak and codependent, consistently creating the same conditions for states to have civil wars. The circumstances in which Ethiopia and Somalia found themselves engaged in civil wars is not unique to each respective country, or even the Horn of Africa. These circumstances are found all over the continent. The continent of Africa is very diverse in language, culture and history. The one thing that links Africa together is the legacy of colonialism. Colonialism is the starting condition for every African state, and is the first factor in every African civil war.

Bibliography

Belachew Yihun, Belete (2014) Ethiopian foreign policy and the Ogaden War: the shift from “containment” to “destabilization,” 1977–1991, *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, 8:4, 677-691, DOI: [10.1080/17531055.2014.947469](https://doi.org/10.1080/17531055.2014.947469)

Collier, Paul, and Anke Hoeffler. “On Economic Causes of Civil War.” *Oxford Economic Papers* 50, no. 4 (1998): 563–73. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3488674>.

Collier, Paul. *The Bottom Billion : Why the Poorest Countries Are Failing and What Can Be Done about It*, Oxford University Press USA - OSO, 2007. ProQuest Ebook Central,

Fullerton Joireman, Sandra. “Opposition Politics and Ethnicity in Ethiopia: We Will All Go Down Together.” *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 35, no. 3 (1997): 387–407. doi:10.1017/S0022278X97002437.

Menkhaus, Ken (2014) Calm between the storms? Patterns of political violence in Somalia, 1950–1980, *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, 8:4, 558-572, DOI: [10.1080/17531055.2014.949404](https://doi.org/10.1080/17531055.2014.949404)

Verhoeven, Harry. (2009) The self-fulfilling prophecy of failed states: Somalia, state collapse and the Global War on Terror, *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, 3:3, 405-425, DOI: [10.1080/17531050903273719](https://doi.org/10.1080/17531050903273719)