Book Review: *Ethnic Politics and State Power in Africa: The Logic of the Coup-Civil War Trap*

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Abstract.

This submission is a book review of Philip Roessler's *Ethnic Politics and State Power in Africa*.

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Philip Roessler's book investigates an important question within the civil war and conflict literature: what causes civil wars in Africa's weak states? While many scholars seek to understand this puzzle, few provide answers as provocative as Roessler's meso-level theory. Civil wars, according to Roessler, cannot be understood apart from their relationships to coups d'état. The two phenomena are manifestations of a security dilemma inherent in weak states. As colonization in Africa has deeply entrenched ethnic identities, as the foundation of politics, Roessler highlights, weak states rely on the inherited colonial legacy of patron-client networks for effective governance of the periphery from the capital. To do so, "big men" in power need to share government resources with rival ethnic leaders in order to garner the support of the latter's ethnic base.[1]

Herein, however, lies the dilemma for political leaders in control of the state: whether to share or not to share power with their ethnic foes. In the volatile Hobbesian world where the state is not the only power with monopoly over violence, where political rivals are also "violence specialists," political leaders weigh the risks of power-sharing. Sharing government resources with rival ethnic leaders bolsters their war-making capabilities and increases the probability these rival networks will try to usurp power via a coup d'état. On the other hand, excluding rivals increases the probability of the state facing a civil war as it loses control over the periphery where its rivals are strong.

As such, political foes in weak states are caught in what Roessler calls the coup-civil war trap, mistrustful of other violence specialists to expect genuine cooperation in a power-sharing scheme, yet wary enough of a civil war to exclude them. While states tend to risk civil war to eliminate what they perceive as an imminent threat of coup d'état if it were to share power, under certain conditions, political rulers can and do choose strategic power-sharing. Africa's more peaceful states, like Ghana, Togo, and Benin, according to Roessler, accept power-sharing when the war-making capabilities of rival ethnic groups (their size or proximity to the capital) are comparable. When the rival group is either large or strategically located near the capital, the threat of civil war is so pronounced that leaders must accept the coup threat and share power.

The book brilliantly employs an iterative mixed-method design, demonstrating the richness of coupling qualitative and quantitative approaches in elucidating complex phenomena such as civil wars. To develop his theory on ethnopolitical exclusion and power-sharing, Roessler offers a detailed case-study of Sudan, his exploratory, theory-building case. In Sudan, the National Islamic Front (NIF) regime had broad political networks that allowed it to quell the Darfur rebellion in the 1990s. In the 2000s, however, the regime dismantled the NIF in order to reduce the chances of a coup. But this left the regime more susceptible to the 2003 rebellion. Roessler uses the Darfur case to argue that temporal variation suggests an underlying political logic in which the threat of a coup leads to actions that increase the chances of large-scale violence.

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[1] Philip Roessler, *Ethnic Politics and State Power in Africa: The Logic of the Coup-Civil War Trap* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 5.

Roessler then tests the generalizability of this theory and the hypotheses developed from his investigation of Sudan using the Ethnic Power Relations dataset and an original dataset. Following the statistical analyses, which confirm Roessler's coup-civil war theory, the book tests the model by offering an in-depth study of the 1998 conflict in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, convincingly illustrating how strategic uncertainty generated the breakdown of power-sharing and led to what has come to be known as Africa's Great War.

Ethnic Politics and State Power, however, raises an important unanswered question: how to escape the coup-civil war trap? The extreme ends of either coup or civil war can be violent and result in more instability. Their mid-point, peace by accommodation within the confines of the trap, is similarly unsustainable. A lasting (and positive) peace would be one achieved by dismantling the trap. How can that be done? Roessler, furthermore, notes Joel Migdal's idea of Africa's "strong societies and weak states."[2] The context of Roessler's study suggests that these strong societies are the ethnic networks that undergird political power. Is this what Africa's strong societies are? Could these very strong societies that sustain the coup-civil war trap help to break it?

Lastly, having presented an excellent in-depth study of cases illuminating the coup-civil war trap, the book leaves wanting a similarly worthy investigation of cases to explicate the intricacies of societal peace through power-sharing. Although the focus on peace through power-sharing may be secondary to Roessler's primary theoretical questions of interest, a more detailed case-study would have only further enriched this section of the book.

In conclusion, Roessler's work is an exciting and significant contribution to the field of conflict studies broadly defined. In accessible, well organized, and generously referenced chapters, Roessler unfolds an innovative and promising theory of civil war that provides students of political violence in Africa with new theoretical tools and perspectives. The book is also of great value to scholars focused on other regions, where Roessler's theory and hypotheses could further be tested. Those who are methodologically inclined will appreciate the mixed-methods design of the book and the superb weaving together of qualitative and quantitative data.

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[2] Ibid,. 47.