FORTHCOMING BOOK REVIEW

DEMOCRACY AND DEVELOPMENT: JOURNAL OF WEST AFRICAN AFFAIRS


by

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A variety of African security challenges, most notably the emergence of collapsed states beset by ethnic, religious, and political conflicts, have fostered renewed debate over the role of foreign intervention in African conflicts. It has been estimated, for example, that at least forty-five percent of Africa’s fifty-three countries experienced some degree of civil strife during the 1990s. The lack of an African consensus over how to respond to these conflicts has invariably fostered a variety of military interventions by at least four sets of actors: (1) the United Nations, as demonstrated by its approval of sixteen peace-keeping missions in Africa since 1989; (2) African regional organizations, such as the decision of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) to sponsor a series of Nigerian-led military operations in Liberia; (3) foreign powers, most notably France, the United Kingdom, and the United States, which have recently intervened in Cote d’Ivoire, Sierra Leone, and Liberia, respectively; and (4) African powers, which is the topic of John F. Clark’s timely edited volume, The African Stakes of the Congo War.
From the perspective of pan-Africanists, such ad hoc military interventions, especially those undertaken by foreign powers without the consent of either local or international communities, are ultimately undesirable; rather than representing an African consensus opinion, such interventions are theoretically driven by the self-interests of the intervening country.

The African dimension of this evolving interventionist equation is captured by two developments during the 1990s. First, a series of successful guerrilla insurrections fostered the rise of what was often called a ‘new bloc’ of African leaders that included Isaias Afwerki of Eritrea, Meles Zenawi of Ethiopia, Yoweri Museveni of Uganda, and Paul Kagame of Rwanda. Successful in the pursuit of power primarily due to their control over strong, disciplined, and battle-tested guerrilla armies, this new generation of elites shared a commitment to create ‘responsive and accountable’ but not necessarily democratic governments that significantly reordered the foreign policy relationships pursued by their predecessors. A second development of the 1990s was the greater willingness on the part of African regional powers, such as Nigeria, Senegal, and South Africa, to flex their military muscle within their regions. Critics have noted, for example, that South Africa’s self-anointed role as leader of the ‘African renaissance’ – the strengthening of democratic practices and economic liberalization throughout Africa since the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 – is part of a conscious effort among South African policymakers to underscore their country’s unique position as an intermediary between the African continent and leading foreign powers in all other regions of the world. An important outcome of these two trends has been the rising tendency of African countries to militarily intervene in their neighbors.
One of the most dramatic case studies of this trend, which is the subject of The African Stakes of the Congo War, was the transformation of internal civil conflict in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (Congo-Kinshasa; former Zaire) into a series of military conflicts that foreign observers now commonly refer to as Africa’s “First World War” (hereinafter referred to as the Congo war). At its height in 2002, the Congo war was marked by the introduction of thousands of ground troops by at least five African countries: Angola, Namibia, and Zimbabwe, which fought on the side Congo-Kinshasa’s government; and Rwanda and Uganda, which were seeking to topple the government. Although the individual stakes of African countries dispatching troops to the Congolese battlefield were extremely varied, together they underscored an emerging reality of African politics at the dawn of the twenty-first century: the rising importance of regional military balances of power and the political-military and economic interests of regional actors. Africa, having provided a battlefield for superpower interests during the cold war, provides another for rising African powers intent on dominating the international relations of their respective regions.

Most of the chapters comprising Clark’s edited book were originally presented at a conference, ‘Conflict and Peace-Making in the Great Lakes Region’, that was held in Entebbe, Uganda, July 10-12, 2000, and funded by the American Center, the cultural arm of the U.S. Embassy in Uganda. Clark, one of the foremost specialists of the politics and international relations of Central Africa, especially Congo-Brazzaville where he has carried out considerable field research, agreed to take on the role of the academic organizer for this conference while serving as a Fulbright lecturer at Makerere University in Uganda during the 1999-2000 academic year. Clark is the coeditor, along with David
E. Gardinier, of an earlier outstanding volume, *Political Reform in Francophone Africa* (1997), and has published widely on the region. To round out the overall coverage of *The African Stakes of the Congo War*, which was completed in October 2001, Clark solicited several chapters in the conference’s aftermath. The net result is a very insightful, thirteen-chapter book that brings together a unique mix of scholars from the northern industrialized democracies (Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States) and the African continent (Congo-Kinshasa, Kenya, Zimbabwe, and South Africa).

An insightful introductory chapter written by Clark sets out some key theoretical debates (although it is stressed that the contributors were not asked to follow a specific theoretical framework) and assesses the relative importance of the internal, regional, and international dimensions of the Congo war (with the regional dimension being deemed central to the project as a whole). This is followed by an excellent chapter written by Crawford Young that examines the Congo war against the broader universe of African conflicts during the contemporary independence era, especially the 1990s, when the human toll of conflicts has been immense. According to Young (pp. 13-14), the Central African region has been particularly hard hit, leading to the loss of at least 3,000,000 lives:

- The Rwandan 1994 genocide and its aftermath took well over a million lives (800,000 to a million in the initial genocide, plus 300,000 Hutu refugees, militia and civilian, slaughtered in Congo in 1997);

- At least 200,000 lives were lost in Burundi since the 1993 coup ousted an elected, Hutu-dominated government;
• And there have been an estimated 1.7 million Congo fatalities since 1998 attributable to the dislocations of internal war.

A subsequent chapter by Jermaine O. McCalpin on the ‘historicity’ (i.e., origins) of the Congo war rounds out the introductory section. One ideally wishes that his historical analysis would have carried through to at least the assassination of Laurent Desire Kabila on January 16, 2001, and the assumption of the presidency by his son, Joseph Kabila, rather than ending with the overthrow of the Mobutu Sese Seko regime in 1997.

The next two sections of the book provide detailed analyses of the involvement of some of the major military contestants in the Congo war. The first section focuses on the ‘post-Mobutu regimes in Congo and their supporters’, including the Kabila regimes in Congo-Kinshasa (Chapter 4 by Kevin C. Dunn), the Angolan regime of Jose Eduardo dos Santos (Chapter 5 by Thomas Turner), and the Zimbabwean regime of Robert Mugabe (Chapter 6 by Martin R. Rupiya). Dunn’s analysis of the Kabila regimes is particularly insightful, although his heavy emphasis on the international dimension, most notably the fact that Joseph Kabila ‘shows signs of having learned the lessons of external reliance even better than his father’ (p. 70), appears to underscore the overriding importance of the international dimension (as opposed to the regional dimension, the presumed focus of the book). Indeed, many of the chapters at times seem to suggest the primacy of international factors in influencing events on the ground, whether in the form of international financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund or great powers such as the United States, leaving the reader with the distinct impression that the original contributors should have been asked to weigh the varied impacts of these influences while they were writing their papers. The least informative (and credible)
chapter of this group (and the volume as a whole) is that related to Zimbabwe, in which the author presents what essentially serves as an apologia for the interventionist rationales offered by the Mugabe regime, rather than a balanced analysis that gives more weight to the self-interested economic factors behind that intervention. One also wishes that a chapter would have been included on the intervention undertaken by the Namibian regime of Sam Nujoma, which sent significant numbers of combat troops and served as an important ideological ally.

The flip-side of the interventionist equation involves the military involvement of the ‘contestants of the Kabila regimes’, including the multifaceted guerrilla opposition in Congo-Kinshasa (Chapter 7 by Osita Afoaku), the Rwandan regime dominated by Paul Kagame (Chapter 8 by Timothy Longman), and the Ugandan regime of Yoweri Museveni (Chapter 9 by Clark). Longman provides an especially good analysis of the multifaceted reasons that potentially prompted the Kagame regime to intervene in Congo-Kinshasa. ‘Their stated justifications for intervention – to eliminate threats to Rwandan security posed by Hutu rebels based in Congo, to protect Congolese Tutsi, and to promote democracy – did play a role,’ explains Longman (p. 130), ‘but the war seems also to have been inspired by other motives less defensible in international circles: the need to quell domestic unrest, opportunities for personal and national enrichment, and the desire to be a regional power’. The most fascinating chapter of this section, written by Clark, offers an historical analogy between Uganda’s intervention in Congo-Kinshasa and United States intervention in Vietnam. ‘The evocation of this analogy is self-consciously intended to serve as a warning to the government of Uganda and is meant to be prescriptive’, explains Clark (p. 145). ‘The United States entered the Vietnam conflict as
a self-confident great power, secure in its purposes and values and economically vibrant; it withdrew, some fifteen years later, weakened, conflicted, self-doubting, and morally and financially diminished’.

A final section of the book focuses on the positive diplomatic role played by South Africa under the leadership of presidents Nelson Mandela and Thabo Mbeki (Chapter 10 by Chris Landsberg), as well as three issue areas that are crucial for understanding the evolution of the Congo war and its ultimate resolution: arms proliferation (Chapter 11 by Augusta Muchai), socio-economic impacts of war (Chapter 12 by Mungbalemwe Koyame and Clark), and refugees and internally displaced persons (Chapter 13 by Jude Morrison). As the authors demonstrate, the Congo war, fueled by the proliferation of regional and international arms networks, has had a devastating impact on Congo’s socio-economic development, not least of all by unleashing enormous waves of refugees and internally displaced persons. This conflict, in turn, has dramatically affected Congo-Kinshasa’s neighbors in Central Africa, not to mention countries in the neighboring regions of East and Southern Africa. As a result, it is not hyperbole to note, as does Young (p. 13), that Congo had become the ‘veritable epicenter of conflict in Africa’, the resolution of which will serve as the starting point for the socio-economic and political-military resuscitation of the region. Toward this end, Clark and the other contributors to The African Stakes of the Congo War provide us with a valuable, necessary first step – understanding the interventionist motivations of regional actors – on the path to conflict resolution and the promotion of an enduring peace in the Great Lakes region.