

CHAPTER 1

Evolving Warfare

Warfare in Africa has undergone considerable change. In 1972, supporters of an anti-colonial liberation struggle in Guinea-Bissau reported that a United Nations (UN) delegation spent seven days in rebel-held territory to learn about the administration that rebels had built to provide services to people there. To the rebels' supporters, this was "the only government responsible to the people it has ever had."¹ A person suddenly transported from that "liberated zone" three and a half decades forward through time would be in for a shock. UN officials in West Africa reported that in Guinea-Bissau it was hard to distinguish between state security forces and armed drug traffickers; they were allegedly in league with one another and showed little concern for the welfare of the wider population.² This time traveler might hear of factionalized fighting in Liberia and Sierra Leone during the 1990s. Young fighters there did not seem to be very different from those who participated in anti-colonial struggles. But the aims of their leaders seemed to be far more parochial: to grab power in the existing political system instead of creating a new one, or to defend a particular ethnic community. Congo, Somalia, Nigeria's Delta region, and many other places suffered from what seemed to be an excess of rebel groups who were fighting one another as much as governments and who largely

¹ American Committee on Africa, "State of the Liberation Struggle in Africa," mimeo, New York, 1 June 1972, 2.

² United Nations Security Council, *Report of the Secretary-General on the United Nations Office in West Africa* (New York: United Nations, 30 June 2008), 4.

displayed a dearth of interest in providing people with an alternative vision of politics or even in administering them in “liberated zones.”

Conflict in much of Africa has shifted from a focus on battles over which side should control and administer the non-combatant population to situations in which governing non-combatants is often less relevant as a central strategy of war fighting. The other great shift concerns how rebels and government forces fight. Colonial governments tried to exploit superior resources and bureaucratic effectiveness to beat back bands of rebels. Rebels had to compensate for their weaknesses through mobilizing and disciplining fighters around a cause and through attempting to gain local acceptance. With popular support or even just tolerance, rebels could out-govern the state. Later, most government forces and rebels would reflect each other in their high degrees of fragmentation, use of similar tactics against each other, low levels of interest in instilling a common sense of purpose among recruits, and seeming disregard for the welfare of non-combatants.

This book explores these and other aspects of the evolving strategies and behavior of armed groups that have fought in Africa since the start of decolonization. From the early 1960s the majority of wars in Africa have involved armed groups that are not part of national armies, or what in this book are called rebels. Although rebels have launched numerous attacks across international borders, declared wars between the armies of states remain scarce in Africa. A contemporary political map of Africa shows only minor changes in boundaries compared to a map from 1890, but such geographical stability masks the considerable internal challenges faced by Africa’s states. Thus an analysis of the evolution of warfare in independent Africa must focus on rebels who challenge states from within and who try to fight to power by taking control of a capital city. As shown by the preceding example from Guinea-Bissau and by numerous examples in the following pages, how this is done has undergone considerable changes.

Why call these armed groups rebels? Labels reflect the changing contexts of warfare in Africa as well as the development of different ways of fighting. In the 1950s, colonial administrators called those who fought for independence “terrorists,” whereas most Africans saw them as nationalist heroes wresting power from alien occupiers. The Federal Government of Nigeria in the late 1960s regarded the leaders of the breakaway Eastern Region as “ethnic separatists” fighting for an independent state of Biafra. Well into the 1970s, Portuguese colonial rulers in Guinea-Bissau, Cape Verde, Angola, and Mozambique faced

“communist insurgents” that many local people viewed as “freedom fighters” dedicated to ending colonial rule. Some people lived in their “liberated zones,” where these fighters administered and implemented their political programs. During the 1980s several armed groups organized “states-within-states” in areas that they dominated in defiance of authoritarian regimes. The Ugandan National Resistance Army (NRA) and the Eritrean People’s Liberation Front (EPLF) swept into capitals with large armies in 1986 and 1991, respectively. Small predatory bands of fighters who crossed the border from Côte d’Ivoire in late 1989 to become the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) joined with the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) in Sierra Leone to become “warlords.” Opponents of such fighters proudly called themselves “vigilantes” and “civil defense forces.” Whatever these armed groups are called, they share the feature of challenging the authority of Africa’s state regimes over the last half century, and for that purpose they will be called “rebels” in this book.

This book examines the history of armed conflicts in Africa to explain how and why the groups that fought in them have evolved. The analysis here is that the behavior and organization of rebels and state forces reflect changes in the wider political context in which they fight. The very fact that states – instead of empires or networks of small, autonomous polities as in centuries past – form the blueprint for politics on the African continent indelibly shapes warfare. Thus most rebels fight to take control of states. In this regard, they reflect the political order against which they fight. The more articulate among them offer political programs that they believe will make better states. Some capture territory and set up “liberated zones” where they organize administrations aimed to show local people an alternative vision of the government that the rebels intend to establish after winning their struggle. More recently, an increasing proportion of rebel leaders have had careers as key members of the political systems and regimes that they seek to overthrow. This connection imparts to rebels a distinctive set of goals and strategies and shapes how they recruit and discipline their fighters and how they treat non-combatant populations.

Not every rebel group behaves in the dominant fashion of its time, and the deviation of some groups from these patterns reveals important information. Some rebels owe a great deal to the style, ideas, and initiatives of particular leaders. It is hard to imagine what the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) in Uganda would be like without the distinctive ideas of Joseph Kony. Kony’s goal to create a government based on

his interpretation of the Ten Commandments is unique among major armed groups. Liberia's Charles Taylor played an integral role in the day-to-day management of the NPFL during the 1990s, using first satellite telephones and then mobile telephone networks to keep in constant contact with his associates. In mid-2005, the depth of popular mourning in southern Sudan after the death of "Doctor John" Garang in a helicopter crash revealed the extent to which the grass roots associated the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) with the personality of that charismatic leader.

Categories of Rebels

Although every rebel group and every conflict in Africa exhibit particular characteristics, broad differences in the general context shape the environment in which rebels make choices. For example, after the collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s, it was not realistic to present a Marxist-Leninist political program and expect diplomatic or material support from Moscow. Rebel leaders of the time found it politic to adopt labels like Liberia Peace Council (LPC) or Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD), regardless of their actual behavior or motivations or those of their fighters. Although the term "liberation" has not disappeared entirely from the nomenclature of contemporary rebels, as in the case of the Congo's Mouvement de Libération Congolais (MLC), others like LURD have adopted names that suggest that they are prodemocracy groups or community-based nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). Since the late 1990s some rebels in Nigeria – the Niger Delta People's Volunteer Force (NDPVF) and its rival, the Niger Delta Vigilante Service (NDVS) – have taken names that evoke community self-defense amid societal violence, official corruption, and regime incompetence.

Over the decades the emergence of different kinds of rebel leaders has reflected large-scale shifts in the character of African societies and the changing role of state administrations. For example, in the 1950s, university education in sub-Saharan Africa served a tiny segment of the population. With a few exceptions, such as Sierra Leone's Fourah Bay College, Uganda's Makerere College, and several South African universities, nearly all institutions of higher education were founded after the Second World War. Although Africans were generally interested in politics before independence, those who enjoyed the social space to

discuss and formulate programs for change and devise concrete plans to make this happen were most likely to be found among the extremely small numbers of university students studying outside the continent. These students directed the discussions of the indigenous nationalist intelligentsia in a more militant vein. Eduardo Mondlane, the leader of Mozambique's anti-colonial Frente de Libertação de Moçambique (FRELIMO) from 1962 until his death in a parcel bomb blast in 1969, received his bachelor's degree at Oberlin College in Ohio (1953) and his doctorate in sociology from Chicago's Northwestern University (1960). Upon graduation, he had two options: a post in the colonial government service of Mozambique, which had instituted a limited policy of co-opting skilled Africans, or a lectureship at Syracuse University.³ He rejected the first position and served briefly in the second because he chose instead to lead a major liberation struggle.

This background shaped the first generation of armed groups in this survey and the subjects of the next chapter, the **anti-colonial rebels** who accompanied the end of intransigent European colonial empires in Africa. Mondlane's counterpart in the colony of Portuguese Guinea, Amílcar Cabral, founded nationalist student groups while studying agronomy in Lisbon. By 1962, he led the Partido Africano da Independência da Guiné e Cabo Verde (PAIGC), having first served a stint as a colonial administrator attached to the agriculture and forestry service. Like Mondlane, he developed his political ideas and plans for action in metropolitan student and professional groups in Lisbon that were interested in anti-colonial politics. Other African students in Lisbon during the 1950s were Agostinho Neto, who became the leader of the Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola (MPLA) and Angola's first president, and Marcelino dos Santos, a key figure in Mozambique's FRELIMO. International congresses of anti-colonial activists from other parts of the world facilitated sharing of ideas and strategies. Attendance lists and programs included a global community of activists who conversed in European languages with other intellectuals, primarily from Europe, whose anti-imperialist critiques were grounded in socialist-inspired state-building ideas.

Massive increases in state support for higher education in the 1960s, especially in the social sciences, created new venues for young people to discuss ideas and political action. State policies to promote higher

³ Gueorgui Derluguian, "Social Decomposition and Armed Violence in Postcolonial Mozambique," *Review* 13:4 (1990): 439–62.

education at public universities resulted in the growth of the indigenous intelligentsia. For example, the student body at the University College of Ibadan (Nigeria), founded in 1948, grew from about 1,000 in 1958 to 8,500 in 1976. Similar increases occurred at other institutions like Makerere University (Uganda) and the University of Dar es Salaam (Tanzania). Social science research occupied a special place in the nationalist intellectual worldview.⁴ It brought together large numbers of students sharing a strong sense of national pride and revulsion at the continuation of colonial control in parts of Africa and, for the first time on a large scale, anger at the scourge of apartheid in South Africa. By the late 1960s, the eruption of armed struggle against Portuguese colonial rule in southern and West Africa energized scholarly activists.

The expansion of secondary and university education also shaped the organization of **majority rule rebels** in the white minority-ruled southern African states that included Zimbabwe (then known as Rhodesia), South Africa, and Namibia. These rebels, the subjects of Chapter 3, saw themselves as closely linked to their anti-colonial brethren, and on occasion they gave aid and advice to one another. Like their anti-colonial colleagues, they saw world politics as a resource that could be used to leverage their struggles against regimes that turned out to be much more militarily formidable than those faced by earlier anti-colonial struggles.

The University of Dar es Salaam stands out during this period. Yoweri Museveni, a young student from Uganda, discussed strategies and tactics of revolutionary struggle there before going on to help form the NRA and fight his way into power in 1986. Among his lecturers was the Guyanese historian and theorist Walter Rodney, a key figure in Pan-Africanist political thought, who taught there from 1968, after his expulsion from Jamaica and a short stay in Cuba. In 1968 Museveni and six other students visited liberated zones in northern Mozambique to report back to the University Students' African Revolutionary Front (USARF) that he and his classmates had founded the year before. His student essays reflect the influence of Rodney's idea that African development was only possible through a radical break with the international capitalist system and the cooperation of revolutionaries across Africa's inherited colonial borders.⁵ The ideas of Martinique-born Franz Fanon also played an important role in Museveni's formal

⁴ Ebrima Sall, *The Social Sciences in Africa: Trends, Issues, Capacities and Constraints* (New York: Social Science Research Council, 2003).

⁵ Yoweri Museveni, *Sowing the Mustard Seed* (London: Macmillan, 1997), 26–27.

education.⁶ Fanon wrote that true revolution in Africa could come only from among marginalized peasants. They alone, he believed, were free of compromise with the structures of global imperialism that corrupted urban working classes and professionals.⁷

Museveni's trip to liberated zones in northern Mozambique brought him into direct contact with members of FRELIMO who had established a guerrilla base among peasants in rural Mozambique. While there, Museveni and other young Ugandans observed how FRELIMO administered their liberated zone, disciplined fighters, and advanced their political program against what they saw as the main problem of divisive tendencies of local ethnic chauvinists. This trip and Museveni's USARF activities brought together in Dar es Salaam what soon became an international community of liberation fighters. John Garang, the future head of the SPLA in southern Sudan, belonged to the USARF. Aware of the impact of the rise of educational opportunity on the African continent, he turned down admission to a doctoral program at the University of California at Berkeley after receiving his bachelor's degree in economics at Grinnell College (Iowa) in 1969. Instead he attended the University of Dar es Salaam on a Thomas J. Watson Fellowship from the United States before joining the Anya Anya insurgency in Sudan in 1970.

Museveni put this practical experience to use when he and a few others founded the Front for National Salvation (FRONASA) in 1973 to liberate Uganda from the authoritarian rule of Idi Amin. Unlike Mondlane or Cabral, Museveni was not fighting against a colonial power occupying his homeland but against an oppressive internal tyranny. Having learned the theoretical and practical arts of insurgency, he considered the practical challenge facing his armed group in preparing to invade the now-independent Uganda and install a government that would implement the revolutionary ideas studied in school and discussed informally with international contacts and in study groups. This third category of armed group, the vanguard of the **reform rebels** who emerged on the scene in the 1980s (the subject of Chapter 4), was intimately familiar with the debates and challenges that affected the first wave of anti-colonial liberation struggles. They were reformers of states in their recognition that independence alone was not enough to build

⁶ Yoweri Museveni, "Fanon's Theory on Violence: Its Verification in Liberated Mozambique," in Nathan Shamuyarira (ed.), *Essays on the Liberation of Southern Africa* (Dar es Salaam: Tanzania Publishing House, 1971), 1–24.

⁷ Franz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 1963).

strong African countries. Most redoubled the efforts of the anti-colonial rebels to create genuine liberated zones and paid explicit attention to how they would transfer this experience to transform their states. They saw this as the key to liberation from a generation of despotic and corrupt state leaders.

In East Africa, the ideas and experiences of FRELIMO were passed directly through Museveni to a new generation of rebel leaders via the struggle of FRONASA. These included Fred Rwigyema, the first leader of the Rwandan Patriotic Army (RPA), among the most militarily formidable and organized insurgent forces to fight in Africa in recent decades. Although Rwigyema was killed in 1990, the RPA went on to drive out a regime that had perpetrated genocide in 1994. Previously he had served as the acting commander of Museveni's NRA. By 1985, Paul Kagame, Rwigyema's successor and president of Rwanda from 2000, played an important role in the NRA. Although no convincing evidence exists of physical contact between these key RPA commanders and Mondlane, after 1994 Rwandan government publications claimed that there had been. They stressed the continuity and connections of liberation struggles from the anti-colonial nationalists to this third category of liberation in a bid to take over the mantle of legitimacy associated with the earlier rebels.

Elsewhere in Africa, universities and student organizations played crucial roles in reform rebel struggles. In the late 1960s militants were an important element in the student body at Haile Selassie I University (now Addis Ababa University). Through expanded educational opportunities, students from the isolated province of Tigray encountered each other in the capital. There they found like-minded youth who joined in discussions about their grievances against Ethiopia's regime and plans for political action. Like Dar es Salaam students, they framed their critiques in terms of problems of an international imperialist global economy. Their analysis of the Ethiopian political situation fit well in this Marxist framework, because it had an emperor whose customs and habits of government could be branded feudalistic. In the early 1970s the Tigrayan Students' Association was formed, which included the founding members of the Tigrayan National Organization, which transformed into the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF).⁸ Like the USARF student group in Tanzania, this association included

⁸ Aregawi Berhe, "Origins of the Tigray People's Liberation Front," *African Affairs* 103 (2004): 575–76.

student activists involved in radical university politics. Most notable among them were the future leaders of the EPLF, a connection that facilitated coordination in their mutual struggle against Ethiopia's imperial regime and EPLF's rivals in the 1980s and early 1990s.⁹

Economic troubles and declining state support for higher education in the 1980s, however, changed the relationship of universities to rebels. Shrinking budgets for higher education, especially in the social sciences, followed World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) insistence that governments devote a greater percentage of expenditures toward primary and secondary education in practical skills.¹⁰ These shifts in the basic structure of higher education shrank the social spaces that earlier activists utilized as they became revolutionaries and rebels. New independent research centers were best situated to adapt to the pressures from global creditors, national governments, and university administrations to focus on income-generating activities. Groups of scholars like the Makerere Institute of Social and Economic Research (MISER) at Makerere University became adept at bidding on foreign aid contracts and grant-supported research for Ugandan policy makers. Others, like the United Nations-supported Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA), have had a significant impact on academic networking but never became centers of activism. Most of CODESRIA's associates from the 1980s onward had to struggle with shrinking government budgets for research, low pay, and deteriorating facilities. Moreover, the appearance of corporate training centers and the growth of private universities in the 1990s fragmented the academic scene even further.

The recession in higher education directly affected the numbers of students with whom activists could share ideas. In 2001–02, the department of political science at the University of Sierra Leone had only one doctoral candidate, who also doubled as a junior lecturer. Its department of economics produced no doctorates that year. Popular perceptions of breakdown and growing political violence on campuses served as added incentives to families that could afford to send their sons and daughters abroad for their educations. Programs in the Ford and Rockefeller foundations assisted others to study outside of Africa.

⁹ John Young, "The Tigray and Eritrean Peoples Liberation Fronts: A History of Tensions and Pragmatism," *Journal of Modern African Studies* 34:1 (1996): 105–20.

¹⁰ Joel Samoff and Bidemi Carrol, *From Manpower Planning to the Knowledge Era: World Bank Policies on Higher Education in Africa* (Paris: UNESCO Forum Secretariat, 2003), 1–2.

Although overseas universities are venues for political discussion and organizing, it is hard – but as we will see in the following, not impossible – to begin building a rebel group on an American or European campus. It is reasonable to expect, however, that this demographic shift in education and the general pursuit of opportunity had an impact on the sources of political activism that would eventually evolve into rebel groups.

The fact that about 40 percent of Africans pursuing doctoral degrees in the United States between 1986 and 1996 chose to remain after completion of their degrees further shrank the pool of potential organizers.¹¹ This did not mean that they were uninvolved; for the members of group came to play important roles from abroad with their financial contributions and provision of support communities for some armed groups. Immigration statistics reflect this trend. In the early 1990s, census figures indicated that more than 26 percent of adult African immigrants to the United Kingdom held academic qualifications higher than “A” or college levels, compared with 13.4 percent of white adults.¹² The 1990 US census showed that 57.1 percent of the more than 360,000 African-born adults who lived in the United States had completed some form of university education. By then Africans constituted the most highly qualified group of immigrants, outstripping the qualifications of immigrants from affluent countries, including those from Europe (18 percent with college degrees) and Japan (35 percent).¹³ By 2000, 83 percent of the 109,000 Nigerian adults who had moved to the United States after 1990 had a university education.¹⁴ Although no one can say for certain what would have become of these vigorous, enterprising, and skilled Africans had they stayed home, one wonders whether the would-be liberation fighter of former years instead became a doctor or a financial analyst or an engineer in New York or London.

Back home in many countries, citizens experienced growing personal insecurity, greater economic hardship, and declining government capacities to deliver basic services. During the 1980s, presidents, who

¹¹ Mark Pires, Ronald Kassimir, and Mesky Brhane, *Investing in Return: Rates of Return of African PhDs Trained in North America* (New York: Social Science Research Council, 1999), 10–11.

¹² Theodore Cross, “Black Africans Now Most Highly Educated Group in British Society,” *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* 3 (Spring 1994): 92.

¹³ “African-Born U.S. Residents Have Achieved the Highest Levels of Educational Attainment,” *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* 4 (Summer 1994): 10–11.

¹⁴ Devish Kapur and John McHale, *Give Us Your Best and Brightest* (Washington, DC: Center for Global Development, 2005), 17.