Why are some African countries trapped in vicious cycles of ethnic exclusion and civil war, while others experience relative peace? In this groundbreaking book, Philip Roessler addresses this question. Roessler models Africa’s weak, ethnically divided states as confronting rulers with a coup–civil war trap—sharing power with ethnic rivals is necessary to underwrite societal peace and prevent civil war, but increases rivals’ capabilities to seize sovereign power in a coup d’état. How rulers respond to this strategic trade-off is shown to be a function of their country’s ethnic geography and the distribution of threat capabilities it produces. Moving between in-depth case studies of Sudan and the Democratic Republic of the Congo based on years of field work and statistical analyses of powersharing, coups and civil war across sub-Saharan Africa, the book serves as an exemplar of the benefits of mixed methods research for theory-building and testing in comparative politics.

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Ethnic Politics and State Power in Africa

The Logic of the Coup–Civil War Trap

PHILIP ROESSLER

College of William & Mary, Williamsburg, Virginia
For Kate and my parents, Anne and Jim
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Preface and Acknowledgments

What causes civil war? This question has been at the forefront of development and foreign policy agendas over the past quarter-century as intrastate conflict remains one of the principal sources of mass violence, displacement, economic destruction, and regional instability. From Syria to Iraq to South Sudan, the scourge of large-scale political violence between the state and its citizens continues.


This book places bargaining over power—the *sine qua non* of civil war—at the center of the analysis. While seemingly an obvious approach, it is surprising the degree to which competition for control of the central government has been marginal to the civil war literature.

---

In focusing on state power, the theoretical approach is fundamentally Hobbesian; civil war is seen as a consequence of the problem of forging order and peace out of anarchy. Hierarchies and anarchies, order and disorder ebb and flow throughout the course of human history. How and why they do so are among the most important puzzles with which social scientists grapple.

In this book, I focus on the anarchic conditions that arose with the dissolution of colonialism in Africa. With the withdrawal of the colonial Leviathan, a fierce competition for control of the extractive institutions left behind by the European imperial powers ensued. In the absence of strong cross-cutting institutions, this high-stakes game for political power often played out along ethnic lines—that is, between different descent-based social groups with shared culture and customs, a common homeland and geographic proximity, and strong norms of reciprocity. The Hobbesian problem confronting African states after independence was how, in the absence of an absolute authority, these strong social groups could forge a political covenant to govern their new countries.

In Africa’s newly independent states, rulers recognized that sharing power with ethnic rivals was integral to building peace. Without such alliances, rulers lacked the capabilities to broadcast power beyond their own group, leaving their regimes vulnerable to societally based armed rebellions that they had little capacity to effectively defeat. But sharing power risked opening the door for their rivals to seize sovereign power for themselves in a coup d’état. Overall, then, this book’s central argument is that the withdrawal of the colonial Leviaths, and the weak ethnically divided states they left behind, confronted Africa’s postcolonial rulers with a coup–civil war trap. The post-World War II international system worsened the strategic uncertainty dominating politics in these regimes by granting sovereign recognition to any group that controlled the capital city, no matter how they came to power and how much control they had outside the capital.

One of the devastating implications that follows from this theoretical framework is that civil war represents the consequence of a strategic choice by rulers, backed by their coethnics, to coup-proof their regimes from their ethnic rivals. With their rivals unable to credibly commit not to exploit their access to the central government to seize sovereign power for themselves, rulers are tempted to choose exclusion as a strategy to

That the coup–civil war trap has also plagued Ethiopia and Liberia after the breakdown of ethnocratic rule illustrates that this political phenomenon is not only a legacy of European colonialism.
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consolidate their hold on power and trade the clear and present danger of the coup d’état today for the uncertain risk of a distant, future civil war. This helps to account for the intractability of civil wars in many African states: they result not from miscalculation or greed but rather follow a clear strategic logic and are deemed the least threatening option for the political interests of the ruling group.

The upshot of this, however, is that as the strategic costs of civil war increase, choosing ethnopolitical exclusion becomes less appealing. And it suggests, counterintuitively, that strong civil war, or threat, capabilities, in which rival groups can mobilize a rebellion that can credibly threaten the capital even when they are excluded from state power, may help to induce powersharing. The empirical evidence demonstrates exactly this. Powersharing is significantly more likely to be self-enforcing when the ruling group and a given rival are endowed with strong threat capabilities due to their size and proximity to the capital. Under such conditions, rulers and the opposition are more likely to choose powersharing and reluctantly trade executive authority via coups—which do not significantly alter the relative distribution of power—than accept a mutually costly total war for control of the state.

This finding, however, points to another pernicious legacy of colonial rule—it tended to create unusually large and unusually divided states. Thus, for rulers of Sudan, Chad or the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), three of Africa’s most notorious conflict-affected, failed states, their countries’ ethnic geography reduces incentives for powersharing with peripheral groups, whose remoteness renders them strategically impotent and gives them little leverage to hold their rulers accountable.

What is the way out of this vicious trap? Deeply rooted in the sociopolitical foundations of the African state, overcoming the coup–civil war trap will not occur overnight. Instead, it will require significant changes over time along three key dimensions: (1) the rules of the game; (2) the structure of the state; and (3) the basis of societal mobilization. Yet, over the past two decades, there has been significant change across all three dimensions. For example, on the changing rules of the game, the African Union no longer recognizes groups that come to power via coups and elections are now the modal source of political change. On the changing structure of the state, a number of African regimes, backed by renewed external investment, especially from China, in big infrastructural projects, have sought to strengthen the state’s capacity to broadcast its power into the periphery. Finally, on the changing basis of social mobilization, urbanization, technological diffusion, and generational change are strengthening interethnic social ties and
bases of trust, while leading an increasing number of individuals to reject political appeals along ethnic lines. This broadening of social identification and social movements increases society’s capabilities to hold incumbents to account if they violate the letter or spirit of constitutionalism.

The significance of these changes should not be underestimated; at the same time, they have a long way to go before the coup–civil war trap is rendered obsolete. For now, coups still remain a viable instrument of political change, if not a path to sovereign power, despite the anti-coup rules of the African Union; electoral rigging and other malfeasance undermine the institutional constraints posed by elections; despite significant investments in infrastructure, the political topography of the African state does not look vastly different than at independence; and, finally, political mobilization along ethnic lines remains the dominant mode of politics in many countries. Until institutional, structural, and social change is consolidated, the pernicious consequences of the coup–civil war trap will remain a key source of state failure and large-scale political violence, as was tragically demonstrated in South Sudan at the end of 2013—the case that opens the book.

* * *

The seeds for this book project were planted long ago when I was an undergraduate student at Indiana University and ended up spending three summers working in western Kenya. My time in Kenya had two profound influences on me: it inspired an interest in both the politics of the African state and civil war. With Sudan’s civil war between the government and the Sudan People’s Liberation Army (SPLA) still raging at the time and spilling over into Kenya, I developed a fascination with Kenya’s troubled northern neighbor. Each summer I was in Kenya I would make my way up to the United Nations Operation Lifeline Sudan base camp in Lokichogio, northwest Kenya. There I hoped to hitch a ride on an aid flight into South Sudan with the goal of learning firsthand from South Sudanese about the long-running conflict. It would take me three years of trying, but I finally made it into South Sudan—only to end up in western Mayom County in Unity State on the day before Khartoum launched one of its final counteroffensives to clear the oil fields ahead of the peace talks getting under way in Kenya. To this day I remain grateful to the people of the village of Keriel who hosted me and kept me safe as we fled for four days together to Bahr el Ghazal; the sight of their bodies getting smaller and smaller as I was safely lifted out of the area by a food aid flight remains seared into my memory. And it is my hope that, in whatever small way, this book contributes to ending and preventing war and the suffering it causes.
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Witnessing the devastating consequences of civil war in South Sudan reaffirmed my interest in the subject and profoundly shaped the course of my Ph.D. at the University of Maryland. At Maryland I was extremely fortunate to study under the guidance of Mark Lichbach, whose formidable theoretical understanding of conflict provided the perfect balance to what I was learning firsthand in the field. At Maryland I also benefited from the guidance of a number of faculty members, including Virginia Haufler, Christian Davenport, Jillian Schwedler, Ernest Wilson, Fred Alford, and, especially, Marc Morjé Howard. As mentor, coauthor, and friend, Marc opened many doors for me while instilling in me the value of mixed-methods research and the importance of family–academic balance.

At Maryland, I also had the opportunity to work for the International Crisis Group as part of the original “dream team” of interns John Prendergast assembled to work on Sudan and other African countries. I would work as a consultant for the Crisis Group at various points throughout my graduate student career and would benefit immensely from the friendship and intellectual support of JP, John Norris, Colin Thomas-Jensen, and, especially, Suliman Baldo and Dave Mozersky. (I remain indebted to Dave for a number of things, but especially for helping from Nairobi to extricate me from the aforementioned trouble I ran into in Mayom County.)

As I was formulating my thesis on the link between political authority in weak states and civil war, Darfur erupted into large-scale political violence. Despite also facing high levels of political and economic marginalization from the central government and intermittent cycles of communal conflict, Darfur had never produced the kind of sustained antigovernment rebellions seen in South Sudan. The puzzle for me was why not and why now. Supported by a David L. Boren Fellowship from the National Security Education Program and subsequent support from a Dissertation Improvement Grant from the National Science Foundation, I set back out to Sudan. I sought to accomplish two things: (1) to better understand the political causes of the civil war in Darfur and (2) to situate it in comparative perspective. In doing so, I became fascinated as to why, a decade before the outbreak of the Darfur civil war, the Sudanese government, also led by Omar al-Bashir, faced and effectively defeated a rebellion in Darfur but failed spectacularly to do so in 2002 and 2003. Same underlying structural conditions, two rebellions, two radically different outcomes. The existing civil war literature could not account for this variation.

In addressing this puzzle I conducted semi-structured interviews with hundreds of Sudanese (many interviewees multiple times) from the top
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Echelon of the Islamic Movement, Islamist cadres, military officers, tribal elders in Darfur, leaders of Darfur’s rebel movements, rank-and-file members of the rebellions, opposition politicians, journalists, civil society activists, academics, and international observers. (Among the internationals, I am particularly grateful to Janice Elmore, Opheera McDoom, and the African Union Mission in Sudan for the assistance they provided me.) With Khartoum as a base, I made several trips to all three of Darfur’s states as well as to Eritrea (where most of the rebel leadership was based at the time), Chad, and Abuja, Nigeria, where the Darfur peace talks were being held.

Despite its reputation to the outside world, Sudan is an incredibly hospitable place to work, as many know who have conducted research in the country. Beyond the famous hospitality, generosity, and sense of humor of the Sudanese, there exists a culture of support and encouragement for educational pursuits and endeavors (sadly a thing that too few Sudanese are able to embark upon). This spirit was evidenced in Sudanese from all walks of life from the amjad drivers in Khartoum, with whom I incessantly discussed the split in Al-Harakat Al-Islamiyya between Bashir and Turabi, to the Darfurians who opened their offices and doors to me to dissect the roots of the devastating civil war in their homeland, which I know could often invoke painful memories.

In Sudan, the following people were especially gracious and patient in helping me understand the complexities of Sudanese politics: Atta el-Battahani, Ali Shammar, Abul Ghasim Seif El Din, Abdallah Adam Khatir, Sayeed al-Khatheeb, General Ibrahim Suleiman, Idriss Yusef, Jibril Abdullah, Qubbi al-Mahdi, Mohammed Hassan al-Amin, Mohamed Suliman Khatir, Sharif Mohamedein, Abdel-Rahim Hamdi, and especially Hamid Ali Nour, who generously served as what amounted to my personal tutor on Sudanese politics. I will always fondly remember our sessions over sweet Sudanese tea. For their friendship and for showing me Sudanese life beyond the political realm, including trips down the Nile River to Crocodile Island, I am grateful to Hassan Salah and Mubarak Mahgoub. I also would like to thank Anwar Idris and Mamoon Mohammed for superb research assistance with translation and in the newspaper archives, respectively. Outside of Sudan, I am thankful to Ali al-Haj for taking the time to extensively meet me several times to discuss the rise and fall of Sudan’s Islamic Movement as well as Professor Abdelwahab El-Affendi for sharing his unparalleled knowledge of the Movement. Last but not least I am exceptionally grateful to Abdulghani Idris from whom I gained a deeper understanding of the Islamic
Movement and broader Sudanese political history and whose sense of humor, compassion, and friendship uplift all who know him.

Having derived an original interpretation of the Darfur civil war and the building blocks of a generalizable theory of civil war in weak states, I then had the wonderful opportunity to further develop and expand the project on fellowships from Stanford University and Oxford University. Both institutions represent incredible intellectual environments and connected me to fellow scholars who would profoundly shape the development of the book. At Stanford, where I was a predoctoral fellow at the Center for International Security and Cooperation (CISAC), I am deeply appreciative to Lynn Eden, the Associate Director for Research, for overseeing the fellowship program and investing in each of us. At Stanford, I tried to absorb as much knowledge as I could from Jim Fearon, David Laitin, Jeremy Weinstein, Michael McFaul, and David Abernethy. Coming to Stanford with Darfur’s sandy soil virtually still on my shoes, their incisive questioning and feedback helped crystallize what at that time were still raw ideas. I am pretty sure it was in one of our lunch conversations that Jim Fearon elegantly summed up my interpretation of the Darfur civil war as a ruler choosing to substitute civil war risk for coup risk. Beyond pushing me to take the project to the next level, I learned from these distinguished scholars the meaning of academic collegiality and mentorship.

After Stanford, I moved to Oxford, where I received an Andrew Mellon Postdoctoral Fellowship in the Department of Politics and International Relations. At Oxford I would be surrounded by a wonderful group of Africanists and political scientists—Nancy Bermeo, Dave Anderson, Adrienne LeBas, Nic Cheeseman, Phil Clark, Anke Hoefler, and Ricardo Soares de Oliveira—from whose friendship and intellectual support I immensely benefited (with special thanks to Adrienne who is a kindred spirit for many of us in our Africanist cohort). My time at Oxford coincided with the publication of the Ethnic Power Relations (EPR) dataset by Andreas Wimmer, Lars-Erik Cederman, and Brian Min. I wish to thank Andreas for sharing the dataset and offering valuable feedback and encouragement at the early stages of this project. The dataset provided an invaluable opportunity to empirically test the existence of a coup–civil war trade-off in postcolonial Africa if I could generate data on the ethnicity of coup conspirators and rebels. So I set off to the enchanting Rhodes House Library to scour its Commonwealth and African Collections for detailed information on all of Africa’s postcolonial conflicts. Indispensable to this endeavor was the Africa Contemporary Record and the Historical Dictionary series, especially the volumes by Samuel Decalo. I am grateful...
Preface and Acknowledgments

to the staff at the Rhodes House Library for their assistance. This research would be published in World Politics in 2011 under the title, “The Enemy Within: Personal Rule, Coups and Civil War.” This forms the basis of parts of Chapters 4 and 8 in this book.

At Oxford I received two grants from the John Fell OUP Fund that proved instrumental to the project’s advancement. The grants allowed me to conduct additional field research in Sudan and critically also in Chad. (In N’djamena I benefited immensely from the assistance of Dr. Siddick Adam Issa, who not only introduced me to a number of key players but whose own insights into the Darfur conflict and Chad–Sudan relations were quite valuable.) The research grants from the John Fell OUP Fund also enabled me to qualitatively test my coup-proofing theory of civil war on a second case. One of the most intriguing possibilities was the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the war that would break out there in August 1998—Africa’s Great War. The quantitative analysis pointed to the DRC case as a paradigmatic example of a co-conspirator civil war, but few seemed to study it in this way. The prospect of delving into the massively complex case of the DRC, a country in which I had never worked, was daunting to say the least. But then I met Harry Verhoeven.

As I was pondering adding the Congo case, I gave a lecture at the Sudan Programme, a forum for discussing Sudan at St. Antony’s College under the inimitable stewardship of Ahmed Al-Shahi, the prominent social anthropologist on northern Sudan, who would become a good friend and supporter during my time at Oxford. It was after that lecture that I met Harry, a D.Phil. student in politics at Oxford at the time. Aptly described by our mutual friend, Phil Clark, as a “one-man juggernaut,” given the depth and breadth of his intellect and scholarship and the dynamism of his personality, Harry had lived and worked in Kinshasa as an intern in the Belgian Embassy some two years earlier and expressed enthusiasm in the merits of adding the DRC to the project. At that moment our collaboration was born, and we set off to work together on applying the coup–civil war trap to the post-Mobutu order in the DRC. From the Holy See in Rome (where we were graciously received by Frank De Coninck, the former Belgian Ambassador to Congo, who was serving as Ambassador to the Vatican at the time) to Kinshasa to Kigali, we tracked down and interviewed as many of the protagonists and other stakeholders involved in the overthrow of Mobutu and the outbreak of Africa’s Great War. It proved an incredible physical and intellectual journey, punctuated by the nightly mad dash across the Boulevard du 30 Juin to O’Poeta, trips to the Congo river, and intense interviews on the
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banks of Lake Kivu, in the back bar at the Sultani Hotel, and in nondescript offices in Kigali. Harry’s theoretical insights, encyclopedic knowledge of Congo and the region, and unparalleled skills in winning and then executing elite-level interviews strengthened this book immensely. Chapter 9 is a product of our incredible collaboration. Unable to contain all of our research and theoretical insights on Africa’s Great War in a single chapter or paper, we have since coauthored Why Comrades Go to War: Liberation Politics and the Outbreak of Africa’s Deadliest Conflict (2016).

After Oxford, I joined the Department of Government at the College of William & Mary (W&M), another wonderful academic institution and intellectual environment and the perfect place to complete the book project. Being surrounded by both supportive and smart colleagues has helped me to see this book to the finish line. At W&M I would like to thank the former chair of the Government Department, John McGlennon, for his steadfast support of my research and my need to make field trips to Sudan, Congo, Angola, and elsewhere in sub-Saharan Africa. I am also grateful to the College’s Faculty Summer Grant Program, which funded summer work on the book manuscript.

At the end of my second year at W&M, the Institute for the Theory and Practice of International Relations (ITPIR) sponsored and hosted a book workshop for me. The book workshop proved invaluable and easily the best day of my young academic career. Filled with positive energy and careful and constructive discussion of debates I had had in my own head for some time, the book workshop strengthened the manuscript immeasurably. I am deeply appreciative to ITPIR and its indomitable director, Mike Tierney, for organizing and holding the workshop. As our colleague Simon Stow describes him, Mike produces a Steve Jobsesque “reality distortion field” that inspires and brings out the best of all of us at W&M; for his inspiration and generous provision of public goods, we are grateful.

For their generous participation and insightful feedback and suggestions, I owe deep thanks to Will Reno, Alex de Waal, and David Cunningham as well as to my colleagues at W&M: Mike, Steve Hanson, Sue Peterson, Paul Manna, Paula Pickering, Maurits van der Veen, Cullen Hendrix, and Dave Ohls.

Beyond the incredible feedback on the existing draft, the book workshop also helped to solidify a collaboration with Dave Ohls. Dave has a razor-sharp mind. It was his intuition that as the costs of civil war and coup converge such that rulers gain no strategic advantage from exclusion
Preface and Acknowledgments

then powersharing becomes more likely that motivated the threat-capabilities theory of powersharing. Armed with this insight, we set out to identify the conditions that lead rivals to choose powersharing. Chapter 10 summarizes the results of that collaboration. We have fully developed and tested that argument in different form and with additional data in our stand-alone paper, “Self-Enforcing Powersharing in Weak States.”

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Abbreviations

AU       African Union
CAR       Central African Republic
DLF       Darfur Liberation Front
DRC       Democratic Republic of the Congo
ECOWAS   Economic Community of West African States
EPR       Ethnic Power Relations
EPRDF     Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front
FAC       Forces Armées Congolaises
FAN       Forces Armées du Nord
ICC       International Criminal Court
ICF       Islamic Charter Front
IGAD      Intergovernmental Authority on Development
ISIS      Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
KUSU      Khartoum University Student Union
NCP       National Congress Party
NIF       National Islamic Front
NISS      National Intelligence and Security Service
NPFL      National Patriotic Front of Liberia
NUP       National Unionist Party
OAU       Organization of African Unity
PAIC      Popular Arab and Islamic Conference
PRC       People’s Redemption Council
PSC       Peace and Security Council
RCC       Revolutionary Command Council
RPA       Rwandan Patriotic Army
RPF       Rwandan Patriotic Front
RUF       Revolutionary United Front
SAF       Sudanese Armed Forces
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SCP</td>
<td>Sudanese Communist Party</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SFDA</td>
<td>Sudan Federal Democratic Alliance</td>
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<tr>
<td>SLA</td>
<td>Sudan Liberation Army</td>
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<tr>
<td>SPLA</td>
<td>Sudan People’s Liberation Army</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SPLM</td>
<td>Sudan People’s Liberation Movement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UNLA</td>
<td>Uganda National Liberation Army</td>
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