Colonial Legacies, Horizontal Inequalities, and Conflict in West Africa: A Comparison of Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire

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What is the root cause of civil conflict in Africa? Though scholars have pointed to ethnic cleavages, economic mismanagement, and a host of other factors to account for the preponderance of violence in the region, one factor is consistently understated or dismissed entirely in this discussion: the distinct legacies of governance left by colonial powers. Because of the temporal distance between decolonization and the present day, scholars often divorce colonial institutions and modern ones in their analysis of contemporary African conflict. In fact, many colonial powers developed, over a century or more of rule, deep-seeded and lasting institutions, which propagated political exclusion, ethnic stratification, and power centralization. These governance practices have wrought profound horizontal inequalities – defined as severe inequities between culturally defined groups (Francis, 2007) – of the political and socioeconomic variety, which have persisted for decades after decolonization and created a climate in post-colonial states that is conducive to civil conflict.

Ghana and the Ivory Coast (Côte d'Ivoire) represent an ideal comparative case study. The two countries are alike or identical in a wide array of key characteristics – the size of their populations, location, geography and climate, the variety and distribution of ethnic groups, regional development inequalities, economic structures, and political systems – yet differ in one major respect: Ghana was governed by the British, while Ivory Coast was governed by the French. Because of this, I argue, Ghana and the Ivory Coast have diverged greatly in the incidence and severity of armed conflict at the national level, particularly in the last two decades. Since independence, Ghana has experienced but one relatively nonviolent ouster, while the Ivory Coast has experienced a bloody coup and two grisly and grueling civil wars, all of which erupted in the past two decades.

Indeed, few have ventured to draw a clear conceptual linkage between the French colonial methods of governance and modern violence in the Ivory Coast. To be sure, though, deep-seeded ethnic, political, and socioeconomic tensions indeed begun to fester under French "direct rule," persisted, and were exacerbated after decolonization, and only later erupted, when the French- installed president passed away. This system of governance principally included tactics of assimilation and the centralization of the bureaucratic power structure (Crowder, 1964). Only those Africans who assimilated to French language and Western education while demonstrating competency and loyalty, as defined by the French agents, could have a place in the central structure of administrative power. This practice of political exclusion along ethnic lines became deeply ingrained in Ivorian society and, as a result, French colonial practices set the stage for eruptions of violence among the politically, socially, and economically disenfranchised of Côte d'Ivoire.

Britain's method of colonial governance, by contrast, was seen as a way for the colonial societies to eventually develop self-government (Crowder, 1964; Gifford, 1971: 503). Britain introduced the unique idea to colonialism that "local tradition and custom should not be revolutionized to suit European ideas," a policy perpetuated by Kwame Nkrumah, the President of Ghana in the immediate wake of decolonization (Taylor, 1962: 48). In accordance with British indirect rule, Nkrumah fashioned a brand of Ghanaian nationalism that transcended tribal conflict, the result of which was relative political inclusivity, a decentralized power structure, and ethnic cooperation (Foster, 1971: 52).

It is widely accepted among scholars that the presence of "horizontal inequalities," or "inequities between socially defined groups," such as ethnic groups, can lead to conflict in a wide range of circumstances. It is further established that deep horizontal inequalities exist in Côte d'Ivoire and elsewhere in sub-Saharan Africa. However, none have explicitly linked the existence of horizontal inequalities in Côte d'Ivoire to French direct rule, which created political centralization and exclusion along ethnic boundaries. The modern policy implications of this thesis are significant. A lack of political inclusivity in any state means that disaffected citizens have no natural avenue through which to vent their grievances. When paired with pre-existing socioeconomic disparities – in Côte d'Ivoire, the North and South are strikingly disparate ethnically and economically– such inequities of political inclusion can be pernicious and indeed lead to civil conflict. As such, any policy that seeks to address civil conflict in Africa would do well to focus on two remedies. First, it is essential to ensure political representation drawn along ethnic lines – in the form of power-sharing agreements or mandatory parliamentary representation for certain groups. Second, the state must redress the horizontal inequalities related to the dearth of economic development in the Ivorian North. Indeed, scholarly work shows that mitigating just one of type of social inequality can significantly decrease a group's likelihood of violent mobilization.

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