

Fragile states: What can we learn from the country studies?

Afghanistan, Sierra Leone and Somalia: these three countries stand for different histories of a fragile state. The author of this article analyses different case studies to determine the various causes, such as the role of ethnic identities, claims to power by clans and other sub-state groups, or the lack of societal representation within the governments. For the author, the greatest risk to a state is violence, which can quickly spiral out of control in a weak state and lead to chaos.



Photo: Glatzer

Despite different ethnic affiliations, a strong sense of national cohesion exists in Afghanistan.

The terms «failed states» or, indeed, «fragile states» describe important concepts, but are also confusing. When we hear the term «failed states», we think of countries such as Somalia, some West African countries (notably Côte d'Ivoire, Liberia, and Sierra Leone), Lebanon during the civil war, or Afghanistan in the 1990s. These countries' state structures are fragmented or have completely broken down; they are marked by violence and lawlessness, and we associate them with social and political chaos. Failed states can destabilize entire regions or become havens for international terror-

ism. Such scenarios are all too common, as a cursory glance at the newspapers, but especially the articles in this issue of *ARD*, demonstrate. The fragmentation and collapse of political and social structures are processes which fundamentally undermine or may even destroy the conditions of life, personal security, stability and development prospects in the affected society. However, the concept also contains a misleading ideological component which harks back to outdated modernization theories: the term «failed states» implies that we should make a distinction between «successful» and «failed» states,

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and suggests that the emergence of a modern «nation-state» is the key criterion of successful development. There is no disputing that functioning political and state structures play a major role in the prevention of violence, in conflict management and peaceful development. However, the relationship between the state, peaceful conflict transformation and successful socio-economic development is far more complicated than the term «failed states» suggests. One of the numerous complex correlations, for example, is that statehood may take very different forms and perform very different functions, depending on the degree of ethnic, national or religious fragmentation within society.

Afghanistan: Do disparate ethnic identities lead to state failure?

Bernt Glatzer's article on Afghanistan offers a detailed insight into the Afghan people's perceptions of their own and others' ethnicities and the role of the state. Both factors are extremely significant: ethnic or religious groups' self-perception, and their perceptions of «the others», can play an important role in the integration or fragmentation of a society. Several issues are important in this context. Ethnic identities are not constant but are often fluid and shifting. They can be perceived in very different ways, and may change, depending on their context: for example, according to whether a specific group wishes to maintain its «own separate identity» from others within the same large community, or whether it wishes to identify with this community as its main point of reference. In this context, there are obvious starting points, based on the social, political, religious or status-related differences within major ethnic groups.

Ethnic distinctions (such as different languages, religious affiliations, traditions and customs) thus exist, but their perceived significance, relevance for the group's perception of its own and others' identity, and political importance depend on the social environment and are mutable. A similar situation arises when ethnic groups seek to demarcate or identify

themselves clearly vis-à-vis outsiders and where political, religious or other markers can be used to denote commonality or difference.

In general terms, the distinction between «in» and «out» groups is more complicated than may often appear at first sight. Individuals and groups almost invariably belong to several «ethno-religious» units: for example, they can be Pashtos, Afghans or Pakistanis, Sunnis or Shi'ites; they may define themselves primarily by their region or social status, or speak Dari or Punjabi (instead of Pashto) as their mother tongue. This complexity of individual identity clearly offers the opportunity for a flexible approach to ethnicity: one specific aspect or another can be emphasized or ignored as the need arises. So there is a good reason why all the articles in this issue do not take ethnic differences as the starting point for their analyses of state failure, but use political factors instead.

Somalia: When the state does not represent society

So if a society's heterogeneity is not, per se, the cause of state failure, what is? In answering this question, the article on Somalia by Ahmed Abdullahi and Jutta Bakonyi offers important clues. Under Siad Barre's dictatorship, Somalia was controlled by a «strong» state apparatus which did not, however, represent society as a whole, but only a few narrow sectors within it. This state was «strong» not because of its high level of performance or efficiency overall, but because of its massive repression. In ethnic terms, Somalia was – and remains – highly homogeneous: 98-99 percent of its citi-

zens speak Somali and are Sunni Muslims. Nonetheless, the country was, and remains, fragmented along separate lines into clans and sub-clans. Under Siad Barre, they experienced the state as an instrument of power that was wielded by some of these clans against the rest of society. This repressive and parasitic system was maintained primarily by resource inflows from abroad, which strengthened the state apparatus during the Cold War and made it largely independent of its own citizens. After the end of the Cold War, these «rent» payments fell away, weakening the state and also reinforcing the conflicts over resource distribution. This explains why other clans and sub-clans which had previously been disadvantaged or excluded from power (and hence from the enjoyment of these resources) took up arms to take over the state – not with the aim of making the state the servant of society as a whole, but to use it as a means of enriching themselves and seizing power. Naturally, rival clans were then prompted to resort to violence to counter this.

As a result, the state became one civil-war faction alongside many others, thereby forfeiting its specific character as a state and beginning to fragment. Increasingly, too, some elements of the former state apparatus acted for their own account, entering into alliances with, or serving the interests of, particular societal groups. A combination of several factors created the conditions for this disintegration process: the state apparatus did not represent society anyway, but only specific groups within it; the state was perceived to be repressive, a «foreign body»; a «national» ideology had lost all credibility because it was clearly seen as being a pretext for a

Young people in the streets
of Sierra Leone's capital
Freetown. Will the new
state offer them a better
future?



repressive state; and the conflict over the distribution of increasingly scarce resources intensified.

By this point, the state in Somalia was no longer a key instrument for the solution of societal problems. Instead, the state itself constituted one of the worst problems, and also offered a potential source of bounty for ambitious social groups which were keen to supplant the existing ruling elite. In this sense, the Somali state had already failed long before its instability and fragmentation had become obvious to external actors.

Violence: The greatest threat to weak states

Violence is a key factor in the fragmentation of state and society. In unstable and weak societies in particular, the regulatory and pacifying function of the state's structures is an important pillar of state legitimacy. These state structures may often be weak and short of resources, resulting in poor infrastructure or public service delivery, but the state may still be a regulatory factor and a guarantor of individual and collective security, and may thus be a symbol of «national» unity. Wherever a state is no longer willing or able to perform its essential functions, it forfeits its ideological, political and therefore also its administrative substance. This

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applies to basic social services, disaster relief, the provision of at least minimal opportunities for public participation, and a reasonably well-functioning legal system. If these core areas of state activity deteriorate due to corruption, clientelism, inability or indifference, the state erodes; it loses its legitimacy in the eyes of the public, and thus becomes less resistant to fragmentation or failure.

In such a scenario, violence as a factor plays a key role. If, in a situation of weak or even precarious statehood, social or political actors use force on a larger scale to assert their interests, the state apparatus is caught in a dilemma: should it resort to violence itself in order to restore social peace and reinforce the rule of law (including the state's monopoly of using

force)? If it does so, this often entails considerable risks and may result in the escalation of the conflict – especially in weak states.

Deploying force successfully on a larger scale requires resources, as well as trained, disciplined and properly equipped personnel and political skills – factors which are often not available, making the use of counterforce by the state a difficult and dangerous option. An inept, excessive and ruthless attempt to impose the state's monopoly on the use of force and quell local violent actors may well fan the flames of the conflict and further weaken the state apparatus or make its weakness even more apparent. Undisciplined, marauding soldiers around the country – hardly an unusual scenario in «weak states» – can easily be persuaded to turn against their own government in both political and military terms.

In political terms, however, any failure by the state to act against local violent actors in the country, and especially an attempt to manipulate or cooperate with them, will result in the state's sacrificing much of its own quality simply for tactical reasons and will ultimately bring the state down to the same level as the warlords. This is a major step towards becoming a failed state. The emergence of independent violent actors is often a key stage – and difficult to reverse – in the process of state failure. It offers an already weak state two alternatives:

either to undertake a major test of its own strength, whose outcome is often uncertain, with the strong possibility of failure, or to relinquish a core area of its statehood and thus become one power factor alongside others, thereby further reinforcing its own erosion.

For the general public and societal groups, the existence of independent violent actors is also an almost intractable problem: in this situation, how should they safeguard their own security, if the state is no longer willing or able to do so? And how should they secure their own political, social or economic interests when potential antagonists are armed, have their own capacity to resort to violence, and operate outside the rule of law? The answers to these questions are depressing and plausible: ultimately, the only options open to these groups are to submit to the violent actors, to join them, or to build their own potential for violence, given that the state no longer fulfils its protective or regulatory function. In this scenario, therefore, the key issues are how to respond to violence, and how to maintain the state's monop-

oly of using force. The solution will depend on the political conditions: if the state is indeed controlled and manipulated by just one sector of society – an economic interest group, a clan, a tribe or other ethnic, national or religious group – it is easier to arrive at some sort of arrangement with other violent factions, for the ruling elite is simply one violent actor which has seized control of the state. However, this would indicate that the state is already disintegrating.

If the state represents the society or a clear majority within it not just in rhetorical terms but in reality, the situation is rather different: in these circumstances, there are greater incentives and, through a broader social basis, also better prospects of being able to enforce the state's monopoly of force. The usual preconditions are a reasonably well-functioning and participatory state apparatus, or one which has legitimacy, in the eyes of the public, due to its efficiency.

Even «strong» states can collapse

In guarding against fragmentation, state failure and social collapse, it is not enough simply to establish a «strong» state. Indeed, if they exert repressive control over the general public, lack participatory elements and, despite their «strength», do not perform key social functions, strong states can actually open the door to state failure over the long term. Once again, Somalia under Siad Barre is a good example. Similarly, attempts to enforce a modern nation-state may also open the way to such risks. For example, as Bernt Glatzer rightly points out in his article, the spiral of violence which resulted in state failure in Afghanistan was triggered by a massive attempt after 1978 to transform a reasonably peaceful society, over which the state «presided» but which it did not «govern» in the modern sense, into a nation-state. This attempt met with resistance, causing the massive potential for violence within society to be channelled by violent actors who then mobilized against the state.

That is precisely why the term «failed state» is also misleading: it implies that the state's weakness or failure is the problem and ignores the fact that in many cases, the problem may be the state itself. It is not the weakness or strength of a specific state apparatus which is the key issue, but its specific character: what matters is the state's efficiency and effectiveness in performing its essential social functions, not its potential for repression. A «strong» state that is viewed as irrelevant, repressive and corrupt by society is a colossus with feet of clay.