Weak States and Weak Economies:
The problem of post-colonial conflict in West Africa
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Conflict at its Worst

Many regions around the globe today have dealt first hand with the difficulties of developing stable infrastructures from the crumbling remains of their colonial predecessors. These regions have undergone brutal civil conflicts in the early years following independence, often leaving tens of thousands dead. Arguably no other region in the world has experienced more civil conflict in the post-colonial years than sub-Saharan Africa. Conflicts, such as the ethnic violence between Hutus and Tutsis in Rwanda and the clashes between local warlords over food supplies in Somalia, are merely a small representation of the overwhelming suffering and civil strife that have plagued Africa since the first colonies were able to break away from their European administrators. Today, the headlines are filled with news about yet another civil conflict between nationalist rebels and the government of Liberia. Sub-Saharan Africa has myriad examples of failed states that have become so mired in civil conflict since independence that few people living within those troubled borders have any idea what constitutes a legitimate state.

Yet sub-Saharan Africa is not just a cauldron of volatile countries constantly in a state of civic unrest. Many nation-states have dealt with the difficulties of state formation and have been able to form quasi-stable governments. The disintegration of formal
institutions and violent uprisings between ethnic groups, that the world has witnessed in Angola, Somalia, Cote d’Ivoire and other troubled former colonies, should not be seen as the standard. Many countries, especially in the southern part of the continent, have benefited from relative stability in recent years. Botswana has not only remained extremely stable since its independence in 1966, but annually receives some of the highest ratings, in terms of political and civil liberties in all of Africa (Freedom House 2002). Senegal, though still dealing with a persistent separatist group in the southern state of Casamance, has largely escaped the harsh military dictatorships and genocide that have plagued other parts of Africa (Beck 1997, 3).

Gaining a better understanding of this phenomenon is of critical importance to both political scientists and policy makers alike. In order to be able to prevent the civil unrest and violence that we see in Liberia today and in other African states in the future, we need to know why some states in Africa have been successful at maintaining the peace, and others have not. The question that this paper poses is how can we explain the variance in levels of civil conflict in post-colonial, sub-Saharan African states?

The term “civil conflict” shall be understood as any act of protest or violence either towards the government, or against another group, within the territorial borders of the country. “Post-colonial” shall refer to the period following the demise of the colonial government, beginning in with Ghana in 1957 (Hargreaves 1996, 131). “Sub-Saharan Africa” shall refer to the internationally recognized countries formed in the post-colonial era that are south of the Sahara desert, or in more precise terms, south of the Tropic of Cancer. This study will exclude Morocco (including the contested territories of Western Sahara), Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt, due to the fact that the process and effects of
colonization in northern Africa differ greatly from those in sub-Saharan Africa. In an effort to include cases that have undergone a similar process of colonization, the aforementioned countries will be excluded from this study. In doing so, results drawn from the data will have a higher degree of validity.

Finally, a note on the dates encompassing the study: the study will begin with the first documented acts of civil conflict in each of the countries, following that country’s independence from its colonial administrator. The general period being studied will begin in the late 1950s, but due to the fact that some countries gained their independence much later than others, the dates for which the data begin may differ greatly. The author recognizes the fact that the global economic and political situation is in a constant state of flux and that these conditions affect the political climate within the countries in this study. Due to the differing years in which each country became independent, each faced different regional and global political, economic and social issues. Yet the extent to which this will have an effect on the validity of the data should be nominal. The study will try to include the most recent data available on the number and intensity of civil conflicts in Africa, given the fact that many countries have dealt with instability since their inception, and others have only recently been affected by conflict within their borders.

It is the author’s hypothesis that the most effective factors in explaining the variance in the number and intensity of civil conflicts in Africa are the degree to which a country’s economic wealth stems mainly from one natural resource or commodity, such as oil, and the strength of state institutions during and immediately after the colonial administration. The economic variable presents strong explanatory power because in a
country where there is only one lucrative source of income, such as oil or diamonds, there is a high probability that a limited group of elites will be in control of that resource and exploit it at the expense of the rest of the population. These types of countries typically have an elite group of individuals in control of the resource being exported, while the segments of the population that are not in control suffer greatly, leading to civil unrest (Diamond 1992, 41). The institutional strength variable presents a compelling argument because states in which there are no effective institutions, through which the population can voice their needs and concerns, would logically be at greater risk for armed rebellions. This idea is not simply one of general regime categorization, but rather a measure of how well the state provides strong institutions through which the population can effectively voice its needs. Countries traditionally categorized as democratic frequently tout elections as the way in which the people have an opportunity to voice their needs and wants, but most political scientists would argue these needs cannot be exclusively met through elections. Rather, these needs are also met through effective judicial review, a usable state bureaucracy that allows interest groups to organize, and effective party systems that represent diverse groups of constituents (Schedler 1998, 93).

**Missing the Point: Where the Scholarship is Lacking**

The body of scholarship that has been written regarding civil conflict in Africa is immense, and covers a wide range of competing theoretical frameworks and hypotheses attempting to explain the causes of civil conflict in post-colonial Africa. These theories and hypotheses range from the near absurd to the quite plausible, yet continue to fall short of an accurate and complete description of why certain states in Africa have higher levels of civil conflict than others. In order to facilitate a clear understanding of the work
that has been done on this subject, I have divided the competing hypotheses into three broader theoretical frameworks.

The first theoretical framework deals with the role of ethnicity in the outbreak of civil conflicts. Scholars from this school of thought argue that the level of tension between ethnic groups is the strongest factor in explaining civil conflict in Africa. The second set of theories is rooted in economics. Proponents of these theories argue that the economic status of African states, either prior to or following independence, is the best way to explain the likelihood of civil conflict breaking out in that state. Finally, there is a large body of scholarship that deals with the political strength of states, arguing that it is neither the ethnic nor economic conditions of a country that explain the likelihood of civil conflict. Rather, it is the political conditions and institutions within the country itself that generate civil conflict.

The basic foundation of the ethnic theory can be developed from the notion that the beliefs and values that ethnicities consider important are often quite contradictory. When ethnicities with differing sets of values exist in close proximity to one another, there is a high probability for conflict. Given the fact that Africa is one of the most ethnically diverse places on earth, it would seem reasonable to suggest that ethnicity might have something to do with the high level of civil conflict on the continent. Some of the specific hypotheses will help to explain this framework more clearly, and will also help to show why the theory is weak in its explanatory power.

One hypothesis that has been suggested is that the level of civil conflict in post-colonial African states can be traced to the division of ethnic groups from long before European powers began to colonize Africa. The conflict that exists in many African
states today is the result of an ancient, primordial hatred between these various ethnic
groups. This hatred was made manifest when European powers fused together these
divergent groups of people that often had no shared history whatsoever (Henderson 2000,
29). Scholars from this school contend that cultural identity comes prior to and has a
greater influence than civic identity, and further that ethnic groups find outsiders to be a
threat to the survival of their own unique way of life, and will fight to maintain that
survival at all costs (Emminghaus, Kimmel, and Stewart 1997, 171).

Most African scholars generally discredit the argument that primordial hatreds
between ethnic groups are the primary cause of civil violence on the sub-continent, yet
the belief remains popular, especially among the media (Bowen 1996, 5). One can only
assume that the persistence of such views stems from the ease with which one can place
blame using this model. Writing off conflict in Africa as merely ancient hatred leads one
to a quick answer, but not a quick solution. If civil conflict in Africa is caused primarily
by the primordial dislike of one group towards another, then how does one find a
plausible solution to the problem? Investigating the phenomenon of ethnic conflict more
thoroughly, one finds that in a majority of cases, the conflict between groups was
constructed by another group, such as a colonial administrator, to keep those two groups
from joining forces and turning their efforts against the colonial power (Snyder 2000,
66). As Bowen (1996, 6) argues, “The colonial powers…realized that, given their small
numbers, they could effectively govern and exploit only by seeking out “partners” from
among local people.” To do so, the colonial powers had to separate the natives they
would work with from the rest of the population, effectively creating divisions that had
not previously existed. Thus, the notion of primordial hatreds between ethnic groups seems largely implausible.

Another hypothesis that has arisen from the ethnicity framework is that the number of different ethnic groups within a given state has more to do with the likelihood of violent conflict than the existence of ancient hatreds between different ethnic groups. This hypothesis contends that the more groups are involved in the political process of a particular state, the more likely those groups will be to take issue with the values or policies of the other groups. The argument stems from a basic idea in political science that when there is a limited amount of an expendable good, such as land or food, competition for that good will naturally arise between groups needing access to that good (Hardin 1998, 683). For example, ethnic divisions in South Africa were long seen as being divided between whites and blacks. However, Esman (1994, 75) notes that one of the greatest difficulties blacks in South Africa had in ending apartheid was overcoming perceived differences between Zulu, Khosa, Tswana, and Soto ethnic groups. Had there been fewer groups with which to fight, a stronger coalition of black South Africans could have been formed to combat the policies of the white Afrikaners.

This hypothesis, like the first, recognizes the important balance between ethnic groups in Africa, but fails to take into account more aggravating factors that are usually behind the ethnic conflicts themselves. Lake and Rothchild (1996, 41) note that far too much emphasis has been given to the idea that ethnic groups bear a deep primordial hatred for one another, and that through the process of colonization, these hatreds have been brought to the surface. In reality, ethnic groups have far more often been benevolent towards one another than been at odds with one another. The idea of ethnic
conflict as being primordial “misrepresents the genesis of conflict and ignores the ability of diverse people to coexist” (Bowen 1996, 3).

I would argue that the ethnic conflict that many claim to be a natural phenomenon, in fact, has more to do with the European colonizer using ethnicity to maintain power within the country. In Rwanda, we see how the Belgian rulers used ethnicity there to keep various groups from forming coalitions against the colonial power. Tutsis received superior education, access to resources, and positions of responsibility in the government while the Hutu majority languished in poverty and discrimination (Newbury 1998, 12). Many, such as Newbury, argue that these contrived divisions bred the contempt among ethnic groups that we see in Africa today, rather than the all too convenient premise that ethnic groups have some sort of natural animosity towards one another.

Proponents of the theoretical framework based in economics counter those in the ethnicity camp by saying that money is more powerful than culture. Scholars from this school argue that various economic factors of a former colonial state are the most powerful explanatory measure in our variance in civil conflict equation. These scholars believe that wealth is a much more divisive force than ethnicity. One can find support for this type of theoretical framework in the writings of many theorists, from Marx to Keynes. When there is a lack of wealth, either among a minority group of the population or the population as a whole, the likelihood of ensuing violence is incredibly high. Such a theory seems to hold a good deal of weight; it is easy for everyone around the world to understand the basic human desire to possess the things that are needed to live. When
one lacks these basic necessities, there is a desire to obtain them no matter what means may be necessary.

Sub-Saharan Africa is at the bottom of many economic indicators measuring the relative wealth of certain regions. For example, the entirety of Sub-Saharan Africa had a gross national income of $311 billion dollars in 2001 while members of the European Monetary Union had a GNI of more than $6 trillion in that same year (World Bank 2003). This disparity of wealth is the factor to which some scholars attribute the differing levels of civil conflict in Africa; those that are not wealthy try to become wealthy, and those that are wealthy try to hoard it from those that are not.

One of the most prominent hypotheses to come out of this school of thought is the argument that states: those countries with a lucrative resource, such as oil or diamonds, are the most likely to fall into the trap of civil conflict. As Terry Lynn Karl (2000, 34) states in her article on the danger of petro-dollars, “The initial bargaining between foreign companies anxious to secure new sources of crude and local rulers…leaves a legacy of overly-centralized political power [and] strong networks of complicity between public and private sector actors.” The elites who are able to control the sources of wealth within their country do so at any cost, no matter how detrimental it may be to the rest of the society. In such systems, the majority of the country starves, while a small minority feasts. The disparity breeds resentment between the haves and the have-nots frequently leading to violence. Even more problematic is the fact that eventually these monocultural economies will run dry, leaving those in power very little with which they can bribe their constituents (Karl 2000, 43).
Upon initial examination, this hypothesis seems logically sound. However, I believe that it is in need of some modification. Mono-productive economies are indeed notorious for being both unstable and prone to violence among the haves and the have-nots within the economy. However, the ability of powerful elites to take control of such resources, and thus the entire country, would not have been possible had the European powers provided the colony with better means of spreading wealth among the population. The colonial powers believed it was necessary to maintain as much influence in their former colonies as possible. To do so, they reasoned, would be much easier when dealing with only a limited group of elites rather than with a diverse population with many different interests and demands (Hargreaves 1996, 194).

Another hypothesis that emerges from this framework states that it is not the presence of a lucrative resource or mono-productive economy that leads to violence, but rather the strength and stability of the economy following independence. What matters most to these scholars is the condition in which economies were left following the departure of European powers that frequently ravaged, to the point of ruin, the resources of the colonies in their possession (Holsti 1996, 62). In his study on the formation of states following World War II, Holsti states, “The colonial state’s main purpose had nothing to do with preparation for ultimate statehood, and everything to do with economic exploitation.” From such a description of the colonial era, one can derive the hypothesis that countries that were more exploited by their colonial administrators, and had fewer resources to distribute amongst the population, would have a higher propensity for violence.
This argument is generally attributed to scholars in the dependency theory camp, who argue that the violence and instability seen in post-colonial states all over the world can be blamed on the detrimental effects that policies pursued by industrialized and post-industrial countries have had on the developing world (Owusu 2003, 1656). Such an argument merely provides a scapegoat for the ineffective leaders and institutions in developing countries, and allows them to continue with their own policies, which are much more detrimental than the policies pursued by European powers during the colonial era. Most African nation-states have been independent for nearly forty years, and to blame current conflict on the state of the economy at the time of independence is more than a logical stretch; it is simply implausible.

The final body of scholarly work centers on the notion that civil conflict in Africa can be understood by examining the type of political situation that exists in a certain state. This theoretical framework argues that instability is the result of the political conditions within a country. The first set of hypotheses in this school argues that the presence of a semi-democratic form of government will lead to the highest levels of civil conflict, while a second set of hypotheses argues that to the degree the majority of power in the government is located at the national level, the higher the likelihood for conflict.

The first set hypotheses that comes from this school of thought is popular in many circles, mainly due to the simplistic view that democracies are peaceful, and autocracies are violent. These hypotheses state that when a government is authoritarian, it has the means to repress any dissent among the population and pay-off any members in the society that appear powerful enough to challenge the government. Bueno de Mesquita (et al 2001, 59) examines this concept in his discussion of minimum winning coalitions,
stating that authoritarian governments do not waste valuable time and resources trying to appease all segments of a population, but rather bribe the most powerful elements into supporting the government and use the leftover resources to subvert any challengers among the population. According to Bueno de Mesquita, “If members of the winning coalition defect to a rival and new members cannot quickly be added to replace them, then the incumbent is deposed and the rival comes to power.” Therefore, it is in the authoritarian regime’s best interests to channel as many of its resources as possible to ensuring that the disenfranchised segments of the society cannot support a coup.

At the other end of the political continuum, truly consolidated democracies afford their citizens the ability to not only voice their opinions and needs, but to do so through the proper and most effective institutions available. In this type of regime, it is highly unlikely that internal conflict will erupt because people have less costly ways of dealing with their grievances. In the middle are the semi-democracies, in which there is no authoritarian government repressing the right of the people to protest or voice their opinions, but in which there are also no effective institutions in place through which the people can voice their complaints. Lacking such institutions, the dissatisfied population finds no other way to deal with its grievances except through violence (Regan and Henderson 2002, 121). This model is best described as a U-shaped relationship, with consolidated democracies and repressive totalitarian regimes at either end of the U and semi-democracies in the middle, where the highest levels of conflict occur.

The U-shaped relationship proposed by Regan and Henderson (2002) is countered by the more traditional linear relationship proposed by other scholars who claim the level of civil conflict is proportional to the percentage or degree of power held at the national
level. The more repressive a government is and the less influence and decision-making ability sub-national entities possess, the more likely it is that the population is going to erupt into violence. Such a scenario can be seen throughout post-colonial African history, especially in the reign of terror under Nigerian dictator Sani Abacha (Adams 1995, 42). The same scenario has also presented itself recently with the removal of the dictatorship of Charles Taylor in Liberia, under pressure from rebel forces laying siege to the capital Monrovia. Simply stated, if the regime is more authoritarian than democratic, there is a higher propensity for violence and protest among the segments of the population that are forced to live under the authoritarian rule (Van de Walle 2002, 74).

The existence of high levels of conflict in places like Nigeria and Liberia, where extremely strong authoritarian regimes were in place, seems to discount the U-shaped hypothesis proposed by Regan and Henderson. Yet, to place total explanatory power on the degree of authoritarianism in a country also seems to be missing the point. While we may be able to find a correlation between authoritarianism and civil conflict, that does not explain how the authoritarian system came into being. Sani Abacha and Charles Taylor did not just decide one day that they wanted to be dictators. There was an institutional system in place that allowed them to grab hold of certain elements within the society, such as a natural resource or the military, and use those elements to consolidate their power.

I contend that one must look more closely at the institutional strength of the colonial regime and the effectiveness it had in performing necessary administrative duties throughout the entire population. Those colonies in which the institutional structure was weak and did little more than extract wealth from the natural resources of the country
were the ones that ended up with dictators such as Abacha and Taylor. These types of colonial governments, ones that did little to develop lasting institutional structures that could assure stable and legitimate governance following independence, are the ones that spawned either brutal, authoritarian dictatorships or divisive, self-interested groups, incapable of forming coalitions on which to establish stable governments.

This process of weak institutions in the colonial government leading to civil conflict in the post-colonial state is only accentuated by the presence of a mono-productive economy. When there is a great deal of wealth to be gained through the control of a lucrative commodity like oil, this only increases the likelihood of an authoritarian regime coming to power. In short, I hypothesize that the institutional strength of the colonial administration, in combination with the percentage of the gross domestic product coming from one commodity, such as oil or diamonds, will have the greatest significance in explaining the variance in conflict in post-colonial African states.

**Lucrative Resources and Institutional Weakness: The Formula for Conflict**

The theoretical framework from which my hypothesis is derived comes from the new-institutionalist school of thought. Developed out of the scholarly backlash to behavioralism, which was popular in political science circles during the 1960s and 1970s, new institutionalism has provided scholars with a new paradigm with which to explain political actions and outcomes in numerous types of settings (Hall and Taylor 1996, 936). Behavioralism suggests that actors seek to achieve a set of goals that are predicated on their attitudes, values, and beliefs. Institutional theory, however, suggests that actors, or even groups of actors, do not formulate decisions, nor do they act, in a vacuum. Rather, the “procedures, routines, norms, and conventions embedded in the organizational
structure of the polity or political economy” affect individual decisions and outcomes in a way that cannot be avoided (Hall and Taylor 1996, 939).

I hypothesize that the institutional strength of the colonial administration, in combination with the percentage of the gross domestic product coming from one commodity, such as oil or diamonds, will have the greatest impact in explaining the variance in conflict in post-colonial Africa. This hypothesis fits neatly into the paradigmatic framework of new institutionalism. In attempting to explain the variance in civil conflict in post-colonial Africa, I disagree with the ethnic, economic and political hypotheses that have been used previously to explain this political phenomenon. These hypotheses focus on the actions of individuals or groups rather than on the institutional structure in which political decisions were made.

My hypothesis centers on the systemic conditions in which decisions about governance and violence were and are made in Africa. The decisions and actions of leaders to repress their constituents and of elites to maintain a monopoly on economic exports, or of the citizens to demand reforms in their country through violent rather than non-violent means can only be understood in the context of the institutional structure in which they are found. It is especially important to take note of the fact that, at times, citizens choose to make known their grievances against the government or other groups within the society through violent, rather than non-violent, means.

In the United States, there are millions of people who disagree with any number of policies that the government or other groups within the society implement. Yet it is very rare that these people make their grievances known by looting a neighborhood of minorities or leading an armed march on the Capitol. This is a rare, or even non-existent,
occurrence in the United States because there is an established and effective system of institutions in place to deal with such grievances. For the vast majority of citizens in the United States, this system of institutions is acceptable, and they choose to act within the institutional boundaries and constraints rather than risk the possible consequences and costs of acting outside of the system.

However, in many parts of Africa, such an institutional structure did not exist at the time of independence, and still does not exist today. According to Henderson, “an institutional vacuum was created within African states [following independence], which left them relatively easy prey for organized insurgency” (Henderson 2000, 29). People stuck in dire economic conditions had no mechanisms to change their situations because the people in charge of the government were also the ones who owned most of the economy. The process of decolonization in Africa happened so quickly that, in the absence of stable democratic institutions from the previous colonial era, there was no incentive or precedent for post-colonial leaders to develop such institutions (Herbst 1996, 377). Why spend the time and resources necessary to build a legitimate, functional, representative government when one could just as easily take control of both the government and the economy in one motion?

Once in power, the elites had little incentive to pay any attention to the needs of all but a very limited number of constituents. Post-colonial rulers did not see power sharing as a means to establish an effective and legitimate government; they saw such actions as foolish and detrimental to the stability and safety of their own regime. The former president of Tanzania is a perfect example of this type of post-colonial African ruler. Julius Nyerere was “associated with the view that unitary states and unified parties
are needed to stem the temptation and development of sub-national ethnic loyalties” (Glickman 1995, 20). Multi-party systems and distribution of power were merely seen as the end of the power that these leaders thoroughly enjoyed.

Up to this point, I have generally agreed with Henderson in his study on the correlates of African civil wars. However, Henderson ends his discussion with the notion that the institutional disarray in the post-colonial era can sufficiently explain the collapse of many states in Africa and the ensuing outbreak of civil violence and wars. According to Henderson, the results of his study “clearly implicate the disparate colonial legacies of African states as significant precipitants of African civil wars” (Henderson 2000, 42).

I believe that additional explanation is needed in order to accurately describe the process of civil conflict in Africa. I contend that the degree to which the post-colonial economy was dominated by a single lucrative commodity would further increase the levels of civil conflict, possibly even more so than the colonial legacy hypothesis itself. I say this because the lack an institutional structure does not necessarily give rise to the disparity between the have and the have-nots that we see in what Karl refers to as the “perils of the petro-state” and the “paradox of plenty.” Given the chance to accumulate a massive amount of wealth, I argue that would-be leaders in post-colonial Africa would be much more likely to refuse to adopt the types of institutions that Henderson argues are necessary for the survival of the state system in Africa, and would instead adopt a system of power-consolidation akin to what Bueno de Mesquita describes in his minimum winning coalition theory.

Further evidence of this phenomenon can be found in John Clark’s extensive research on the effect of oil in the political and economic development of the Congo
He discusses how increases in oil revenues during the 1970s were instrumental to the consolidation of power under the Congo’s first military dictator, Marien Ngouabi. Ngouabi transformed the Congo into what is commonly known today as a “rentier” state, one in which the government extracts wealth from the population by selling access to its lucrative resources. Ngouabi’s regime, along with that of Denis Sassou-Nguesso, who ruled the Congo from 1979 until 1992, was plagued by constant coup attempts, many of which Clark attributes to the drastic fluctuations in oil prices that occurred during the late-1970s and mid-1980s. Thus, one can see that the presence of an extremely valuable commodity, like petroleum, does not necessarily lend itself to increased prosperity within a country, but rather to a lack of stability.

The preceding explanations of the importance of the institutional structure and level of diversity within the economy of a post-colonial state seem to be heavily reliant upon one another. That is why my hypothesis considers both variables when assessing the level of civil conflict in African states. In a situation in which an individual controls not only the wealth and the means to distribute it among the people, but also the government through which the constituents might have the chance to voice their grievances, there is no other option for the citizens than to make their demands known through violence.

Measuring Unrest: A Systematic Approach to Analyzing Conflict

Measuring levels of civil conflict in Africa is not an easy task. As the numerous studies on such a phenomenon that exist today indicate, there are many ways to operationalize the dependent variable of civil conflict. The most accurate measure available is one provided by Monty G. Marshall (2003), a Senior Research Associate
with the Center For International Development and Conflict Management at the University of Maryland. Marshall has provided an extensive database of conflict data entitled “Major Episodes of Political Violence 1946-2002.” From this database, I have compiled the aggregate number of deaths occurring in each of the sub-Saharan countries discussed in this study from the time of their independence until December 31, 2002. The difficulties associated with the collection of such large amounts of data on civil violence should be noted. Distinguishing between coding a death as being the result of civil unrest or merely as a random act of violence can be an arduous process for researchers. One should note that Dr. Marshall’s numbers were rounded to the nearest hundred, which is also reflected in my data.

Examination of the dependent variable provides us with a number of important observations about the levels of civil conflict in various countries. For example, seven cases recorded zero deaths attributable to civil violence or unrest from the period of their independence until 2002. Five of the cases are islands or archipelagos, located off the coast of the continent, yet still considered part of the sub-continent in most literature. However, it is interesting to note that only two countries actually on the sub-continent, Botswana and Namibia, recorded zero deaths due to civil violence since independence, and Namibia has been independent only since 1990. At the other end of the spectrum lies the former Zaire, now the Democratic Republic of the Congo, which recorded 1,621,500 deaths from civil unrest since its independence from Belgium in 1960. The mean for this variable is 153,070 deaths with a median of only 2,500, indicating a skewed distribution.

In order to operationalize the first independent variable of institutional strength upon independence, I have utilized data from the Polity IV project collected by Marshall
and Keith Jaggers of the University of Colorado at Boulder. In order to capture the concept of institutional strength most accurately, I want a variable that does not simply provide a measure of how democratic or authoritarian an African regime was upon independence, but rather a variable that describes how much access the population had to various outlets for political expression. I do not want to limit this description to just elections, but rather to include the notion of how well the governmental institutions provided means through which the population could effectively express demands.

The variable that I chose, originally entitled Competitiveness of Competition (PARCOMP), measured the extent to which non-elites were able to access institutional structures for political expression. The variable contains six categories, from 0 to 5, labeled Not Applicable; Repressed; Suppressed; Transitional; Factional; and Competitive. The Not Applicable category was kept in this analysis because this category indicates that sufficient data was not available to code a particular case, but rather that there were effectively no institutions within a particular country at the time of independence for non-elites to express their views. A brief examination of the central tendency of this variable shows that there were four cases receiving a score of zero on this variable, Comoros, Somalia, Uganda, and Zaire. Interestingly, there was only one country that received a post-independence institutional strength score of five, which was The Gambia. The mean and median were nearly identical for this distribution, at 2.04 and 2.00 respectively, which indicates that the distribution is not skewed and follows a normal distribution pattern. Table 1 below provides the frequency of responses for each category of institutional strength.
The second independent variable in my hypothesis is the degree to which countries were dependent upon a single commodity during the nascent years after independence. Using data drawn from the *World Development Indicators 2003* (World Bank, 2003), I was able to determine the percentage of a particular commodity sector such as mineral mining or agriculture in terms of the total export earnings of the country. I gathered this data from the first year of independence for each country, or from the first year for which data was available. I then constructed an ordinal variable by dividing countries into those which had less than 40% of their economy in one sector, those that had from 40% to 59% of their economy in one sector, those that had between 60% and 80% in one sector, and those countries that had more than 80% of their total export earnings coming from one commodity sector. The variable was coded with categories 1 through 4, with 1 representing those countries with less than 40% in one sector and so on.

Six countries recorded scores of 4, meaning their economies were highly dependent on one commodity at independence. At the other end of the spectrum, thirteen
countries scored a 1, meaning that their economies were relatively diversified at the time of their independence. The mean and median for this variable were 2.32 and 2.00 respectively, indicating a non-skewed distribution. Table 2 provides an indication of the frequency of each category response to the mono-production variable in the study.

![Table 2](image)

Operationalizing the variables for the competing hypotheses that I will include in this analysis proved to be slightly less difficult. I began by operationalizing the variable for the ethnic fragmentation and primordial hatred hypotheses. Because both hypothesis deals with similar ideas of ethnicity, I have chosen one variable to represent the two hypotheses. It is difficult to operationalize the idea of primordial hatred. Determining whether a group’s hatred for another group is primordial or not would prove to be nearly impossible, let alone the task of deciding how strong such hatreds between groups have been over time. However, I believe that a measure of ethnic fragmentation in general will provide the best possible representation of both the primordial hatred concept, and the number of effective ethnic groups concept. Michael Bratton and Nicolas van de
Havlik of Michigan State University (1996) have developed an effective measure of ethnic fragmentation in their study entitled *Political Regimes and Regime Transition in Africa 1910-1994* which I will utilize to test these hypotheses. The original variable was titled Ethnic Fragmentation (ETHNIC) and was formulated by dividing 1 from the summation of the squared percentage of the population that each ethnic group shared in a country. A higher resulting number indicates a larger degree of ethnic fragmentation.

The measures of central tendency show us that the mean level of ethnic fragmentation is 3.348 and the median is 3.448, indicating a proportional distribution. Lesotho recorded the lowest level of ethnic fragmentation at 1.0204 and Tanzania recorded the highest with 9.803. It is interesting to note that both had two of the lowest levels of civil conflict according to the dependent variable, indicating that a correlation between ethnicity and civil conflict may not exist, but such a conclusion cannot be reached until the results have been analyzed.

The competing economic hypothesis to my single commodity hypothesis is that the strength of the economy after independence is the greatest predictor in levels of civil conflict. The variable that I will use to operationalize this concept also comes from the Bratton and van de Walle study, and was originally titled Economic Growth (GROWTH). The variable recorded the average annual rate of growth in GNP per capita, by percent, for a twenty-five year period from 1965-1989. The range for this variable is the most interesting aspect, with Botswana averaging an 8.5% increase in GNP per capita over that twenty-five year period, while Mozambique averaged a –8.2% increase over that same period. The distribution had a mean and median of .442 and .200 respectively, indicating that it was slightly skewed.
Finally, I will test a hypothesis arising out of the political theoretical framework, which states that the regime type of the country in question is the most decisive factor in predicting levels of civil conflict. In order to operationalize this variable, I will again use data from the Polity IV project. Because regimes fluctuate at a rapid pace on the sub-continent, it is difficult to describe a particular country as being either democratic or authoritarian, especially over a period of time, such as in this study. Therefore, the most accurate way of measuring the regime type for a particular country will be to average the scores each country received on the Autocracy Score (AUTOC) variable from independence to the present. The variable was constructed using an 11-point scale from 0-10 with 10 representing highly autocratic states. By averaging these scores, we can find accurate measures of the regime type for each country that reflect changes in the regime type over time. The most autocratic state was Zaire, or present-day Democratic Republic of the Congo, with an average of 8.25 on the autocracy scale. The lowest was The Gambia, with an average of 1.00 on the autocracy scale. The mean and median for this variable were 6.82 and 5.46 respectively.

In order to test the effect of each of these independent variables on the dependent variable, I will use a multivariate regression as my measure of significance. The multivariate regression test allows me to test the two independent variables of my hypothesis, which are both ordinal level variables, along with the other independent variables of competing hypotheses, which are interval level variables, simultaneously. From this analysis, I will be able to determine which of these variables has the most predictive power in explaining variance in levels of civil conflict in sub-Saharan Africa.
The regression analysis will predict how much change in the dependent variable is associated with a unit increase in each of the independent variables. The standardized beta coefficient from this test will predict this amount of change caused in the dependent variable by each independent variable. In addition to the standardized beta statistic, I will also be interested in the significance level, which should be less than .05 in order to indicate that these results are statistically significant and did not happen merely by coincidence. Finally, I will examine the r-squared statistic, which will indicate the amount of variance in my dependent variable that was predicted by my independent variables.

**Interpreting the Statistics: Is There Correlation?**

The regression analysis was run with Number of Deaths as the dependent variable, and Institutional Strength, Degree of Monoproduction, Growth of Economy, Autocracy Score, and Ethnic Fragmentation all as independent variables, tested simultaneously. Table 3 provides the results of the multivariate regression analysis, including the important r-squared, standardized beta, and significance level statistics.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model</th>
<th>Standardized Coefficients</th>
<th>Significance Level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Beta</td>
<td>t</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>(Constant)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>.418</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>.088</td>
<td>.563</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-.289</td>
<td>-1.601</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>.216</td>
<td>1.274</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>.021</td>
<td>.131</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*a. Dependent Variable: Total # of deaths*
The first figure that is of importance to the results is the column labeled ‘Significance Level’. This column provides the significance level for each of independent variables. A significance level of less than .05 indicates that the results obtained from running a particular independent variable on the dependent variable statistically would only occur less than 5% of the time, indicating that the results did not happen by mere coincidence, and are therefore statistically significant. Unfortunately, none of the independent variables tested obtained significance levels of less than .05, indicating that these results are not statistically significant. The variable with the closest significance level to .05 was the Growth of Economy variable, with a significance level of .118. The independent variables that were developed from my hypothesis, Institutional Strength and Degree of Monoproduction, obtained significance levels of .678 and .577 respectively, indicating that the results from these variables are not significant.

Were the given results significant, one would see from the standardized beta scores that the Growth of Economy variable had the most explanatory power, indicating that for every 1% change in the average growth of the economy, the number of deaths was reduced by .289. The next most powerful explanatory variable would be the Autocracy Score, for which a 1-unit increase would yield an increase in the number of deaths of .216. Neither of these variables provides a very strong explanation for why there is variance in the level of civil conflict in Africa, nor do any of the other variables for that matter.

Another indicator of the failure of these variables to provide sufficient explanatory power to variance in my dependent variable is the r-squared statistic, which
was .160. The r-squared statistic indicates how much of the variance in the dependent variable was explained by the independent variables in the regression analysis. An r-squared statistic of .160 means that the independent variables only explained 16% of the variance in the level of civil conflict in post-colonial African countries. Obviously, there is a great deal of variance left to explain that lies beyond the explanatory power of the independent variables that I constructed.

Given the fact that the independent variables of this study failed to obtain significance levels of less than .05, I cannot safely support any of the variables as being strong predictors of the level of civil conflict in sub-Saharan Africa. Although my hypothesis has a strong theoretical foundation and logically stands up to the question of why some African countries have higher levels of civil conflict than others, I must reject it empirically, due to the fact that the independent variables of my hypothesis failed to provide statistically significant results.

The purpose of this study was to provide policy makers, scholars, and state leaders with data that can help them understand why certain countries in sub-Saharan Africa have higher levels of civil conflict than others. The problem of civil conflict in Africa is one of grave concern, not only for those who live on the continent itself, but for the entire global community as well. In determining the factors that lead to higher levels of civil conflict, scholars and policy makers alike can find ways to deal with those factors, adjusting them as best as possible to mitigate the violent effects of conflict within states.
The results from this study unfortunately do not provide its intended audience with sufficient data for addressing this severe problem. Logically, my hypothesis, that the institutional strength of a state following independence and the degree to which its economy relied upon a single commodity for export revenue, was sound. However, the variables that I chose to represent these two concepts failed to demonstrate that they did indeed help to predict levels of civil conflict in Africa. This could be due to a number of factors. Forty-seven cases were included in the study, and while not a large number, this should be enough to prevent any significant outliers in any of the variables from influencing the validity of the results. Therefore, I do not believe that the sample size of my study is the primary reason I failed to obtain significant results.

Most likely the data from which my variables were developed came from too broad a range of sources. Because neither my dependent variable, nor either of my independent variables in my hypothesis came from the same source, it is likely that there are possible discrepancies in the numbers that led to a failure in finding correlation. Relying on numerous sets of data that are collected in a number of different manners and at different times is dangerous; yet, in this case, it was the only viable option.

It is also possible that the numbers themselves were not accurately reported, especially due to the fact that the numbers represent quite sensitive and possibly incriminating information against the countries themselves. For example, the sources from which Dr. Marshall drew his data on aggregate numbers of deaths often came from press reports of violence within the countries themselves. While Dr. Marshall is certainly a well-respected scholar in this field and made every effort possible to ensure his data
was accurate, it is easy to see how such numbers could have been misrepresented by the sources from which Dr. Marshall drew his data.

In light of these possibilities, I would argue that, in order to develop a test that accurately predicts levels of civil conflict in Africa, a unified database of the information pursued in this study is needed. From such a database, researchers could be more certain that discrepancies between different variables and the manners in which they were reported would not exist, and a stronger model for predicting conflict could be found. It is my sincere hope that through the continued efforts of myself and other researchers that such a database can be developed.

Civil conflict in Africa is one of the most troubling phenomena in the world today. Since the majority of Africa became independent from European colonial powers in the 1960s, millions upon millions of lives have been lost to this type of violence. While there are countries striving towards stability and peace, there are sadly no signs that this brutally destructive type of conflict will disappear any time soon. The community of scholars, academicians, policy-makers, and world leaders cannot idly watch these wars continue to rage in Africa. That is why research in this area is so vital and must be continued until an effective and lasting solution to this problem can be found.
Works Cited


