

Sierra Leone: State Failure in a Terrorist's Playground

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Literary Review

To fully illuminate this subject, we must first engage leading scholarly thought on the themes of weak, failed and collapsed states which are central to this objective of study. This general knowledge base will allow the average reader to identify current definitions and methods of categorization and provide increased understanding of how these concepts fit into traditional theories of international politics.

Dr. Robert I. Rotberg, Director of the Belfer center's program on Intrastate Conflict and Conflict resolution at Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government, has become one of America's leading scholars in failed state theory. He believes that modern states are the successors to the sovereign monarchs of yesteryear, and hence incorporate all the powers of modern day sovereigns who represent the political good. The political good itself represents an organized and predictable manner in upholding society's collective values and norms which make up a nation's laws. (Rotberg: 3) By following his argument, any state can be judged to be either thriving or failing by assessing how efficiently it provides a series of hierarchical political goods. A nation state may gain legitimacy by fulfilling the claims on political goods from the citizens residing within its borders. (Rotberg: 2) Depending upon how severely a state is lacking in its capacity to deliver these political goods to the citizenry, will determine if it is weak, failing, failed or collapsed. Dr. Rotberg's definition of sovereignty and the failed state is mirrored, if not as detailed, in other scholar's views.

Recognizing that state failure and state collapse are recently new political terms, Tonya Langford addressed this issue in, "Things Fall Apart: State Failure and the Politics of Intervention." Here, she identifies how "state failure is a complex, multifaceted

phenomenon that defies conventional methods of peacekeeping, peacemaking, and peace building and challenges the standard conceptual and operational frameworks within which international relations theorists and practitioners function.” Emphasizing how “no two situations are alike,” she agrees with Rotberg that state failure occurs when the state is inefficient in providing basic services to its citizens. (Langford: 59) Langford also relies on William Zartman, whose extensive case studies in Africa show that “a state, defined as the authoritative political institution that is sovereign over a recognized territory, fails when it no longer performs the functions normally attributed to it.” (Langford: 64)

Nelson Kasfir also refers to Zartman when explaining how a failed state does not always have to be accompanied by destruction. He points to how society, in some circumstances, fills in where state authority has proven inefficient. When this happens, the localization of power may prove a more effective means of providing political goods. (Kasfir: 58) On the opposite side of the spectrum, Kasfir also writes, “In its most extreme form, state failure means the disappearance of both public authority and its supporting social norms.” (Kasfir: 54) Here, Kasfir warns of the destructive violence that often precipitates from domestic anarchy. (Kasfir: 54) Symptoms of state failure, however, are not confined to societies showing total domestic anarchy. States running the gamut of weak, failed and collapsed states are also vulnerable.

According to Rotberg, the difference between strong and weak states is not measured in how successful they are at providing all political goods but in how efficient they are at delivering the goods that are most crucial. Security is the most important and influential political good because it creates the framework from which other political

goods can be provided. Once a society is guaranteed reasonable protection from cross-border and internal conflict, other political goods are more easily delivered. Subsequent political goods include: essential rights such as freedom to participate in all forms and levels of the political process, a recognized and reliable platform from which citizens can address local and national grievances, order of law, as well as medical, educational, transportation, communication and financial systems. All political goods do not have to come directly from the central government but can also be provided by non-government organizations. (Rotberg: 2-3) These goods provide a general rubric from which we can categorize states' levels of power.

While other scholars do not spend time on explaining the circumstances around strong states, Rotberg defines them as strong performers along his political goods rubric. Weak states perform well in some areas but fall short of citizens' expectations in others. As poor performance in delivering goods increases, so does the weakness of the state. Failed states are a subcategory of weak states; however, a state does not necessarily have to fail in all categories in order to become a failed state. (Rotberg: 4) He introduces another category, collapsed states. In his essay, *The Failure and Collapse of Nation States*, Rotberg states how, "A collapsed state is a rare and extreme version of a failed state. Political goods are obtained through private or ad hoc means. Security is equated with the rule of the strong." A vacuum of authority is created and the state "is a mere geographical expression, a black hole into which a failed polity has fallen." (Rotberg: 11) The International Crisis Group has also identified another category, shadow states, in the report *Liberia and Sierra Leone: Rebuilding Failed States*. According to the ICG, shadow states are very dangerous because they become vulnerable to renewed fighting

and state failure. A perilous cycle of failed states turning into shadow states that later fall again into state failure can happen even under the nose of an international peacekeeping force such as the U.N. This happens because in some circumstances, a failed state can be misleading in its actual level of recovery. It may appear to be on the path of reconstruction, but if the internal bureaucratic and legislative systems are motivated by greed, the recovering flow of goods may be redirected to certain individuals or groups instead of the population at large. Decision-making avenues may also be redirected to benefit the powerful, all underneath a false umbrella of recovery which clears the way for another state failure. (ICG: 4-5,7) Even though scholars may disagree on certain terminologies of state weakness and failure, they are most agreed upon over the security threat which such state circumstances indicate.

Stephen D. Krasner, Dept. of State's Director of Policy Planning, and Carlos Pascual, Dept. of State's Office of Reconstruction and Stabilization Coordinator, warn emphatically that when states become weak, non-state actors such as warring groups and transnational terrorist organizations can easily take advantage of the state, posing one of the greatest threats to global security. (Krasner) Kasfir identifies how security dilemmas and/or violent predations always accompany state failure. The first is driven by fear when citizens automatically seek safety from whomever will provide it; the second is motivated by greed where powerful individuals search for material gain in the wake of the central authorities' collapse. (Kasfir: 55) In most cases, the political and economic systems in failed states are non-transparent, not easily held accountable and cloak the actions of ruthless warlords who operate outside of the state's legitimacy. (ICG: 4-5)

That anarchy or weakness within a state can simultaneously pose problems to global security calls for a review of some international political theories.

In *The Danger of Failed States*, Krasner and Pascual state that, "Today, stability requires more than maintaining a balance of power among strong states. Safety both here and abroad now depends on the ability of the United States and the international community to make sovereignty work to establish democracies that improve the lives of ordinary individuals rather than of the ruling elite." (Krasner) It is difficult to fit failed states neatly into a traditional theory because most theories require national entities as a basic framework. However, the theory of globalization lends credence to how weak and failed states are able to threaten world powers. Because this theory rationalizes how the growing interconnectedness of the world breaks down national boundaries, it allows failed states to call for increased responsibility from international authority, such as the U.N., to rebuild these crumbling polities.