

Why do states collapse, and what exactly happens?

Interest in the notion of «state failure» has seen a dramatic upsurge in recent years. As a rule, changes in global framework conditions are held responsible for this decrease in state control and legitimacy. But the prominence of this topic in the international debate easily overlooks the fact that the phenomenon of failing states is not new, but has existed since the division of the world into nation-states.

Moreover, it is almost impossible to establish a uniform pattern of state failure. Nonetheless, specific functional, institutional and territorial deficits are characteristic of failed states.

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Photo: Global Aware

In the late 1990s, so-called «failed states», «para-states», «quasi-states», «fragile states» or «anomic states» emerged as a key issue in the peace and conflict research debate. Yet this highly diverse terminology is itself indicative of the difficulties involving in defining and labelling this new phenomenon, which has now come to feature so prominently on the political agenda. The debate about state failure has seamlessly replaced the discourse on ethnicity and new nationalisms prevalent in the 1990s against the backdrop of ethnically legitimated and escalating violence in the Balkans, the Caucasus, the Great Lakes region in Africa, and the South-East Asian archipelago. At that time, the key focus was on issues such as the definition of «nation» and the appropriate response by the international community to ethnically motivated demands.

Today, however, the «state failure» debate focuses primarily on the state's functional deficits and its replacement by private actors. The political background to this

In weak states, new «border empires» are forming which national governments are powerless to control.

debate is that in many countries, including in sub-Saharan Africa, the state largely lacks the capacity to exert any controlling or regulatory influence on political processes. In essence, these two separate debates highlight the opposing sides of the same coin: the «classic» model of the nation-state – i.e. the congruence of state, nation and territory – has broken down, thereby revealing national homogeneity, the rational functionality of the state, and the world's familiar territorial order to be mere illusions. The international system that was based on the division of the world into sovereign nation-states, and which experienced 40 years of stability during the bipolar world order of the Cold War, is now being fundamentally questioned. The expression of this political crisis is the growing number of quasi-pro-

tectorates under international administration. They take a variety of forms and include Kosovo, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Timor Leste, Afghanistan and Iraq.

State failure – a new phenomenon?

General opinion is that the global structural change under way since the 1990s has had a significant impact on the weakness of states. This argument goes as follows: with the end of the Cold War, the ideologically motivated financial and development assistance supplied to many developing countries fell away, depriving many regimes of their main source of funding.

At the same time, international development cooperation was restructured following the widespread acceptance of the 1989 Washington Consensus. In line with the rise of neoliberalism, the international financial and development institutions began to promote deregulation. The state-oriented modernization strategies that had been popular in the 1960s fell out of favour. The state was no longer regarded as the driving force for development but its major constraint. Familiar weaknesses besetting the state – such as corruption and clientelism – were suddenly regarded as «incurable diseases» of the Third World against which development cooperation was apparently powerless. Consequently, less development assistance now flowed into state coffers. Simultaneously, the financial resources thus released were used to promote the private sector and civil society. At the same time, the ongoing process of globalization challenged the state's existing authority across the board. Under pressure from international financial and development organizations, the developing countries had to cut their import duties, which meant they were unable to protect their national markets from foreign competition. So at a time when the state was facing increasing challenges – a burgeoning population, stagnating economic growth, or environmental degradation – it had far fewer resources at its disposal than in the 1980s.

A frequent outcome of these structural changes was the erosion of statehood. On the one hand, the state's resources were now inadequate to cater for anything more than an ever smaller clientele. On the other, the state was increasingly forfeiting its legitimacy in the eyes of the losers in this deregulation process. Social welfare and social security systems could no longer be maintained, or underwent privatization. The erosion of public services meant that fewer and fewer popula-

tion groups could now be reached by the state.

At the same time, the dominance of clientelism and corruption in the state apparatus was becoming increasingly apparent. Public resources were being plundered for personal gain. The contentions over the allocation of sinecures increased in intensity and escalated into violent conflict. During the 1990s in particular, the ensuing rebellions, which were legitimated in ethnic or religious terms, led to the curtailment and even the breakdown of the state's monopoly of force.

The extent to which economic constraints played a key role in many of these violent conflicts became apparent at the end of the 1990s. New economic cycles emerged, described variously as civil war economies, economies of violence or shadow economies. They were globally networked, were based on resource extraction and trade, and undermined the international legal norms which it is the state's duty to enforce. The diamond trade in Sierra Leone and Angola, coltan and tin mining in Congo, and drug cultivation in Afghanistan, Burma and Colombia were merely the tip of the iceberg.

Despite these indicators, which reveal the state's increasing weakness since the 1990s, the significance of the current debate about the processes of state failure should not be exaggerated. This debate suggests that state failure is a new trend which has not been identified before. Accordingly, the world of states was automatically presumed to be operational, at least until the end of the Cold War. It completely ignores that, in historical terms, the emergence of the «modern» nation-state is a fairly recent phenomenon and that most countries in the world have come into being since the end of the Second World War. Aside from notable successes such as Botswana or Singapore, most of these «new» states have never developed as functioning state systems. Frequent rebellions in these new states have challenged the state's monopoly of power; the public administrations have invariably been vulnerable to nepotism and corruption, and the majority of the population has generally viewed the state as a foreign body, perhaps even as hostile and intrusive.

Hence, it could thus be argued that not the world itself, but our view of the world has changed over the last 15 years. During

the Cold War, the nuclear challenge and rival socio-political ideologies camouflaged the inadequate development of statehood in many regions of the world. Against this background, we should not forget that the emergence of the modern nation-state in the Western world was the outcome of a process that lasted centuries, during which time the concept of the nation-state evolved in the context of specific events and processes (e.g. the French Revolution, the Enlightenment, industrialization). It would therefore be presumptuous to expect that the concept of «the state» can be easily exported worldwide, that it can be adapted to fit every civilization in the world, and can be implemented within a few decades.

A classification system for state failure

So what defines state failure – in other words, the incapacity of statehood? This question is difficult to answer, for statehood takes many different forms according to the individual country, its history and specific social structure. Attempts to arrive at a taxonomic order or classification system for states therefore generally fail, simply because there are many very differing perceptions of the state – among its own population, the international organizations, or other states. Similarly, classification based on the state's effectiveness in various «fields of governance», such as the monopoly of force, political representation, social welfare, or the rule of law, also breaks down when confronted with individual cases; the same applies to

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an evaluation of the state based on bureaucratic penetration. Countries such as Pakistan, Nigeria and Indonesia have been failing for decades in key fields of governance and head the «hit list» of countries in which the state's collapse is predicted, and yet at critical moments of political instability, these countries show

unexpected resilience. Some observers regard countries such as Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan or North Korea as strong, perhaps even over-powerful states, for their state institutions are omnipresent. And yet others classify these states as fragile and artificial due to the dominance of patronage and the lack of interaction with citizens.

Although it may be well-nigh impossible to establish a ranking system for state failure, there are still a number of central features which can be defined as key elements of extreme state failure. At the functional level, these include the breakdown of the state's monopoly of force, and the loss of a unified system of law. The collapse of the state's monopoly of force due to the emergence of rival militia clearly reveals the impotence of the state's enforcement mechanisms; striking examples are Afghanistan, DR Congo or Somalia, where the militias have almost completely supplanted the state's security organs. The judicial system is also an important aspect, as reliable enforcement of codified legal norms creates general security. Lawlessness results in arbitrary justice, further undermining the state's legitimacy in the eyes of its population. The ability to enforce the law also has an international dimension. Failure by the state to uphold international legal standards or fulfil the international community's expectations – whether in the war on terrorism or by taking action against illegal forms of economic activity – legitimizes international intervention, especially if the powers that control the system of states, especially the USA, consider that their security is at risk. Recent examples are Colombia and Afghanistan.

At institutional level, patronage is probably the key challenge facing a state. In many countries, a fundamental problem is that the state is not the common refer-

ence point for society, but is subordinate to the interaction of relationships within a given community. If groups that are organized along ethnic, local or tribal lines come to dominate the state apparatus, this opens the door to corruption and the arbitrary distribution of public resources. As a result, the state forfeits its legitimacy in the eyes of large sections of the population. The medium- and long-term impact of these processes is the shifting of economic and political resources away from the state towards informal actors, for whom academics have coined the phrases «intermediaries», «non-state actors» or – more graphically – «warlords», «drug barons» or «big men». The outcome of this «patronization» of the state apparatus is the emergence of parallel structures in which various informal actors operate alongside the state and influence the country's political fortunes.

A further fundamental aspect of state failure is that territorial reference points, including borders, become increasingly irrelevant. In many cases, regional empires emerge; impossible to define precisely in territorial terms, they replace the conventional administrative structure based on districts, provinces etc. In countries like Afghanistan, Somalia or the Democratic Republic of Congo (formerly Zaire), shifting alliances among the warlords are constantly redefining where one fiefdom ends and another begins. As a result, the state's borders are often in a constant state of flux. This creates «border empires» in which numerous cross-border

Afghanistan is a prime example of how strong local structures have emerged in a weak nation-state.

interactions take place; examples are the border region between the Democratic Republic of Congo, Burundi and Rwanda, and also the Pashto tribal territories in the border region of Afghanistan and Pakistan.

State failure: The outlook

If we venture a glance into the future, general opinion tells us that we are experiencing a renaissance of the pre-modern world order: across the world, state structures are collapsing, territorial borders are being levelled, and international norms and standards can no longer be enforced. The dominant picture is one of anarchy and mutual conflict on all sides. Yet according to the usual counterargument, we are simply experiencing the political manoeuvring typical of the protracted evolutionary process that ultimately leads to functioning states. In line with this argument, the development of state structures has always been accompanied by violent conflict and wrangling over national norms and the constitution of the state. Accordingly, we are witnessing the breakdown of an artificial state which has been imposed from outside, along with the emergence of domestic political processes which will culminate in the emergence of a modern state.

Finally, there is a third possibility, namely that new mixed forms of pre-modern and modern government are emerging which cannot be encapsulated in conventional concepts and terminology and are reflected in a general change in the key frame of reference for political rule. In such para-sovereign states, which are characterized by the formation of oligopolies, we see that a state can break up into various centers of power but may still retain its significance as an interlocutor at international level and as a provider of political resources.

The illusion that modern statehood can be enforced rapidly – a notion which had faded during the bipolar world order – is now enjoying a revival and is becoming stronger than ever. The crises of the last ten years, especially Afghanistan's role in the events of 9/11, have also made it clear that despite corruption and a lack of legitimacy, weak or eroded states can no longer be excluded from development cooperation, because state failure has not only local but also global ramifications. However, the appropriate way to respond to such states, and the question how statehood can be strengthened in this context, continue to present the international community with massive challenges which are extremely difficult to resolve.



Photo: Glotzer