

Wars, Guns and Votes: Democracy in Dangerous Places

Review of Paul Collier's book

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•Reacting to Prof Paul Collier's book that patronises 'unsuccessful' Sub Saharan states and others, researcher MUTUMA RUTEERE rejects its imperialistic tone, noting that Africa has handled its governance and security problems well

Paul Collier, a professor of economics at Oxford University, has written a troubling book. *Wars, Guns & Votes: Democracy in Dangerous Places* is troubling because it takes to a new extreme some of the ideas that have steadily gained currency in international development and humanitarian discussions on Africa and the developing world.

Collier's focus is what he calls the countries of "bottom billion", largely Sub-Saharan Africa and some Asia countries. His argument is that these countries are structurally insecure and structurally unaccountable. These post-colonial countries, lack social cohesion as they are too large to be nations and are too small to efficiently produce basic goods such as security that are the responsibility of states.

In Collier's view, the experimentation with democracy in these countries has failed. Elections that the "international community" has assiduously promoted have merely driven these countries to a cul-de-sac from which they cannot extricate themselves.

Collier's prescription is therefore simple: the international community has to step in and take on the burden of providing and guaranteeing security for these countries. The international community can do this by investing more in international peacekeeping and intervening militarily. He concludes that military coups should also be encouraged against leaders who steal elections and jeopardise democracy.

Collier's book is important for several reasons. First, its author is a highly regarded international expert on development who is regularly called upon to advise international multilateral institutions that support African development. He is also a professor of economics at Oxford University and the Director of the Centre for the Study of African Economies, where he is producing the next generation of experts for Western foreign ministries and for international organisations. What he therefore proposes will come to influence events and policies in developing world.

Second, it is important to address the arguments raised by Collier because they are part of a set of influential ideas on the question of the use of military force by the West for humanitarian purposes in the non-Western world. Because bad ideas have the tendency of contaminating good ones faster than the good ones can cleanse the bad, it is important that

we inoculate the good by robustly confronting the bad.

In 2000, a Canadian government-led initiative constituted the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty to examine the dilemma posed by UN Secretary General Kofi Annan on international response to systematic and widespread human rights violations in the face of state sovereignty.

The commission coined and popularised the idea of “Responsibility to Protect.” In its argument, sovereign states have the primary responsibility to protect their citizens against catastrophe. In the event they are unable or unwilling to do so, the community of states has the responsibility to provide that protection.

Most policy and international affairs experts understood that argument to apply to contexts of mass slaughter or genocide, similar to what happened in Rwanda in 1994. In practice however, the appetite for the use of Western military force to “do good” in the developing world has been growing with new grounds for “humanitarian intervention” being promoted in policy think tanks and academic circles.

NGOs no longer neutral

What has come to be known as “humanitarian intervention” gained ascendancy in policy and academia in the West following Nato’s intervention in Kosovo in 1999. The failure of the international community to act decisively to prevent the Rwanda genocide in 1994 has also heavily influenced the discussion surrounding the use of military force to “rescue strangers” faced with the peril of genocide or mass slaughter.

Couched in the language of morality and ethics, this new form of humanitarianism rejects any suggestion that it is imperialistic. Writing in the current issue of the Boston Review, Paul Collier has sharply rejected the criticism by fellow economist William Easterly of New York University that his advocacy for military intervention in poor countries is not even “neo-colonialism” but full blown and old-fashioned “colonialism”.

By speaking in the name of universal humanity, this military humanitarianism has allowed humanitarian and human rights actors, development experts and even old-fashioned empire builders to find common cause in the use of weapons in “rescuing” others.

Where in the past, the humanitarian movement stressed its neutrality in contexts of armed conflicts, certain sections of the humanitarianism movement now advocate the use of military force in the name of humanity. In fact the earliest advocate of an international “right to intervene” is Bernard Kouchner, the founder of the charity, Medicines sans Frontieres, who is currently the French Foreign Minister.

However, the humanitarian justification advanced by scholars like Paul Collier is not necessarily accepted in those countries where military interventions take place. Certainly it was not accepted in Iraq. As a result, the United Nations, which was seen as legitimising the US military intervention, was attacked in 2003 and its representative, Sergio Vieira de Mello killed.

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), universally known as the very symbol of humanitarian neutrality was also attacked in Iraq in 2003. In his book, *The Humanitarians*, David Forsythe, a leading expert on the ICRC has pointed out that the ICRC was well known

in Iraq, having operated in the country since the days of Iran-Iraq war.

The reason, the ICRC was targeted this time, is because it was no longer seen as neutral – the consequence of the erosion of the idea of neutral humanitarians. Conor Foley, writing in the Guardian in May 2004, has noted that in places like Iraq and Afghanistan, “the humanitarian emblems” designed to protect NGOs and other humanitarian actors, “now identify them as legitimate targets.” Those who attacked the humanitarian agencies and the United Nations saw them as extensions of the American military mission.

At the onset of the war in Afghanistan, the US Secretary of State Colin Powell was clear that he regarded NGOs as subcontractors to the US mission noting that “NGOs are such a force multiplier for us, such an important part of our combat team ... [we are] all committed to the same, singular purpose to help humankind....”

Even such ardent liberal Western supporters of the war in Iraq such as the Canadian scholar and politician Michael Ignatieff have concluded that the humanitarian governance imposed after intervention is “imperial because it requires imperial means: garrison troops and foreign civilian administrators, and because it serves imperial interests.”

Most arguments for military intervention to solve the problems of bad governance in Africa and other parts of the developing world are often predicated on a stunning disregard for the complex politics of nation-building.

Keen to convince a skeptical official West to intervene, most of the interventionists, like Paul Collier, reduce the complex political dynamics of African conflicts into simple morality tales of good versus evil.

Ethnicity misunderstood

In the Kenyan case, Collier concludes that the evil of ethnicity inevitably led 98 per cent of the Luo to vote for their ethnic kin, Raila Odinga (now Prime Minister in the coalition government) and likewise the Kikuyu to vote for Mwai Kibaki, to a person. Collier is not alone in viewing ethnicity as Africa’s destiny. Many analysts share the view that ethnicity is the basic identity of most Africans and not the nation-state.

This reasoning often ignores the fact that the ethnic group in its political understanding in Africa is to a considerable extent a product of the modern African state. That for most Africans, the most relevant social and cultural unit, outside the family is likely to be the clan rather than the ethnic group.

Ethnic groups gain relevance when they are recruited for political exclusion or competition for access to state resources.

In other words, ethnicity is actually a consequence rather than the cause of such political behaviour as voting. The argument here is not that there can never be grounds for outsiders to intervene in African countries to avert genocides or mass slaughter. The thinking informing the International Commission that popularised the “responsibility to protect” is sound.

African states have also gained important expertise and experience in creatively addressing war and violence on the continent. Unfortunately, there is often a knee-jerk attempt to ignore or underplay the achievements by the African Union and other regional efforts in

responding to African crises.

African initiatives

Collier, for instance, suggests that the British intervention in the Sierra Leone war is the model for what the West can do for Africa but ignores the intervention by Nigeria which for almost a decade committed its forces and finances to avert complete collapse in both Sierra Leone and Liberia.

Likewise, he makes no mention of the South Africa-led Southern Africa Development Community's intervention in Lesotho in 1998 to reverse a military coup. Of course, long before humanitarian intervention became fashionable concept, Tanzania had sent its military into Uganda in 1978 to stem Idi Amin's reign of terror.

In fact regional states have shown greater willingness to put their soldiers at risk whenever they intervene militarily or undertake peacekeeping activities. In his book, *Shake Hands with the Devil*, General Romeo Dallaire, who commanded of the UN Mission in Rwanda at the time of genocide notes that his best troops were the Ghanaians and the Tunisians.

Coups discredited

Since the argument of interventionists such as Paul Collier stand on a premise of an Africa that is incapable of solving its problems, they tend to ignore whatever progress Africa and the developing world has made.

To study Africa as though everything about its history is an unbroken catastrophe is not useful to African struggles for better governance, development and human rights.

Surely, the democratisation struggles of the 20th Century are important indigenous developments. If Tanzania managed to forge a nation out of a diversity of its peoples, on what credible basis can one conclude that Africa's diversity is its curse?

To prescribe the threat of military coups as a tool for enhancing good governance in Africa as Paul Collier suggests is to return the developing world to a past it is still struggling to free itself from.

The military coup is now discredited in Africa as a means of ascending into power. It was not used to solve the disputed George Bush re-election. The United States used its own systems and institutions to rectify that problem.

The ascendancy of the discourse on security which is often collapsed into development, as Collier does in his work, should also concern Africans and others in the developing world. While it is important to view security as a right that the state should guarantee, security is not the basis for all rights. The temptation to "securitise rights" — to view all other rights and social needs through the lens of security should be treated with caution.

Failure to do so, the developing world and Africa in particular will have opened itself up for military adventurism in the name of "providing security".

The terms "imperialism" and "neo-colonialism" may be a little overused, but states still act in their selfish interests in international affairs. Pure humanitarian motive is a good idea, but to act as though that idea is the reality is very unwise.

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