The Challenge of Civil Wars to Multilateral Interventions – UN, ECOWAS, and Complex Political Emergencies in West Africa: A Critical Analysis

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ABSTRACT

Politically and economically weak states are often vulnerable to political disasters which pose considerable challenges to multilateral interveners. During such disasters, the infrastructure of a country can be paralysed and in the emerging chaos, forces of hostile opposition might mobilise in order to take over the government, or people might lose faith in government altogether. This article seeks to analyse the dynamics of such situations by using Liberia and Sierra Leone’s complex political emergencies (CPEs) as empirical studies. Here, I analyse the impact of these two CPEs on the collaborative intervention schemes initiated by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the UN to prevent basic governmental institutions from falling apart. Despite the intentions underlying such intervention schemes, efforts at resuscitating governance structures do not come without difficulties and challenges. In this article, I analyse some of the different discourses concerning the role of international actors during conflicts and the manner in which such assistance can be exploited by ruling elites to maintain themselves in power in situations of civil wars.
Introduction

One striking feature of international relations since the early 1990s has been the unprecedented scale and scope of international interventions to mitigate, contain and resolve violent conflicts within African states occurring as a result of state collapse and ensuing complex political emergencies (CPEs). In response to such crises, endeavours to resolve the problems related to such occurrences have become a major theme in the post-Cold War period. Different rationales are given for the choice of intervention instruments. Some are chosen in response to situations where a state is negligent in relieving large-scale human suffering, or is itself the perpetrator of violence. Mediating such crises are sensitive operations usually associated with acute political, economic and ethnic challenges. The crises in Liberia and Sierra Leone were exposed to such international interventions though it would appear with totally different outcomes. What is perhaps most significant about these interventions was that they became the first United Nations (UN) missions to be undertaken in conjunction with already established missions by a sub-regional organisation, namely the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS).

While this collaborative intervention scheme has generated several insights, there is still the need for conceptual clarification concerning the use and application of certain terminologies when analysing the challenges posed to international interveners in such CPEs. The demands for humanitarian assistance from the international community to prevent and alleviate the impact of CPEs have increased. For analytical reasons, I differentiate between disaster relief and humanitarian assistance. Disaster relief is the assistance provided during natural disasters and generally aims to alleviate the immediate, circumstantial effects of disaster. As a result, such relief tends to be short-term, designed mostly to save lives endangered by the event itself and principally concerned with the provision of temporary shelters, medical treatment, food and clothing. Assistance provided during politically-driven disasters will be termed humanitarian and military assistance. Because the provision of humanitarian and military assistance in recent times have occurred during civil wars, the provision of such assistance is operationally and politically more complex. Responses to complex political emergencies are, however, distinctively different from those to natural disasters. The key distinction between the provision of disaster relief and humanitarian/military intervention is that the latter is explicitly politically-driven. They can also be distinguished in terms of the nature, character and mechanics of the assistance they engender. Both types of disasters – natural and politically-driven –