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No complex cooking recipe has one single ingredient, as African wars or conflicts in the post-Cold War era do not have one single underlying cause. Paul D. Williams uses a chef analogy to explain in his well-researched, data-full and comprehensive book *War & Conflict in Africa* the different reasons why the continent explored an unprecedented rise in conflicts since the 1990s. Williams researches the most repeated ingredients that sparked the flame of war, as well as the international response given to these, with a critique and pessimistic tone that lets the reader feeling that there's little to do to help stop violence and prevent it from happening in the future. Perhaps the lack of a wide range of solutions is what is missing in a book that rigorously describes causes and responses to conflict in the last twenty years in Africa.

The author divides the book into three clear sections that helps readers switch their focus from facts, to causes and finally to consequences.

The first part of the book focuses in laying out the number of conflicts in post-Cold War Africa. To do so, Williams first defines the word conflict and then presents the various lists of armed conflicts and casualties that have been studied beforehand, as well as separating these into intrastate or interstate conflicts. As Williams explains, "statistics is a necessary point of departure for any analysis" (p.33). The author compares deaths and conflicts within the African continent and with the rest of the world. Williams reaches the conclusion that "post-Cold War Africa has suffered more than its fair share of organized violence" (p.33).

Why did so many conflicts spark from 1990 onwards? To answer this question the

Book Review:

War & Conflict in Africa

By Paul D. Williams

author divides the second section into five chapters, each dedicated to one ingredient that has been argued as central for the outbreak of conflict in Africa: type of regime, resources available, sovereignty, ethnicity and religion.

From all five, the author emphasizes the type of neopatrimonialistic regimes as the main ingredient. Williams shares Christopher Clapham's statement that "the place to start trying to understand any political crisis is always with the government in power"¹, and says that these kind of regimes produce "factionalization of society that inevitably leaves them at significant risk" of conflict. (p.55) Williams says these regimes "tend to exhibit authority tendencies" (p.56) and defines them as a mix between "the machinery of modern bureaucratic state (and) traditional ideas about patronage and clientelism"(p.56). Therefore, his focus is on the elites and their greed for power, that translates into a type of government which oppresses those who strive to be heard.

Williams disregards the other four factors as vital for the outbreak of conflict. First, he argues that referring to Africa's wars as "resource wars" is a simplistic and misleading way of defining them which "de-politicizes" the conflict and reduces it to an economic rationale (p.72). Despite this, the author does give importance to the availability of resources to explain the endurance of many rebel groups and wars. The second ingredient is sovereignty. Although Williams says it is a repeated and decisive factor, he argues that beneath lies a real request for further participation in state issues. If participation was granted, sovereignty issues wouldn't be relevant. He argues that, instead, oppressive elites neglect minorities the chance to

¹ Christopher Clapham, [Comments on the Ethiopian Crisis](#), Centre of African Studies, 07/11/2005

have a say in government, so these then feel the need to secede from the state in their pursuit for self-determination, which in occasions leads to a violent conflict.

The author disregards ethnicity as a central general aspect for the outbreak of wars in post-Cold War Africa. Williams uses the most ethnic conflict in Africa, the Rwandan genocide where Hutus tried to exterminate Tutsis, to argue that an ethnic-based approach to the outbreak of the conflict lacks concordance. He sustains his argument by saying that it was the citizens' choice to choose their ethnicity, as they were given the chance to write down in an official paper if they preferred to be a Tutsi or a Hutu, therefore indicating the fake construction of ethnicity. Moreover, some Hutus targeted other Hutus during the genocide just because they looked like Tutsis and a maximum of 7-8% of adult Hutus actively participated in the genocide. All of this makes Williams conclude that "an ethnicity script was used as camouflage for the power plays of a small elite who sought to control the government" (p.127).

Finally, he reduces religion's importance in the outbreak of African conflicts. With exception to Joseph Kony's Lord Resistance Army's battle against the Ugandan government, which "is literally inexplicable without reference to the spirit world" (p.144), Williams debates that the religious factor, if present at all in conflicts, was only driven to the table when violence had already started for other reasons.

The last section of the book focuses on the responses to the conflicts. It first dives into how African countries developed institutions for conflict solution and prevention and then into international responses. In this second part, Williams is harsh. He first reprimands the United Nations and western countries for ordering huge tasks to be done with very few resources, undermining the size of the conflict. The author then argues that foreign institutions ignore locals as they seek to just sign a peace agreement without actually achieving real peace. He regrets that these actions has led aid and peacekeeping personnel to situations where everyone rejected their presence within the continent. Furthermore,

Williams notes that UN operations need to have the consent of the host government, which constrained their area of action and made them seem too close to the regime in power. This led to the controversy that, sometimes, "humanitarian aid, intended for the victims, strengthened the power of the very people who had cause the tragedy"². Due to this ineffective international aid and development programs, Williams shares a pessimistic view about the potential actions that foreign powers can take to end and prevent conflict in Africa. He admits that "the rather depressing conclusion that follows is that, if powerful local groups really want to wage war, external forces will have a tough time trying to stop them" (p.227).

Williams proposes to demilitarize politics and to "close the gap" between the set of tasks and the resources given to peace operations to achieve expected results. These could range from involving locals rather than government institutions in peacemaking, peacekeeping, aid and development operations to make sure aid reaches those in need, but also effective demobilization policies that include economic opportunities for combatants outside violence, such as jobs in agriculture or industry.

Overall, this book helps the reader to learn a lot about the complicated nature of war and conflict in Africa and its useful for scholars and general public interested in gathering quantitative and qualitative knowledge on the causes that led post-Cold War Africa to be the bloodiest continent on Earth.

About the author:

Paul D. Williams is currently an Associate Professor and Associate Director of the Security Policy Studies program in the Elliott School of International Affairs at the George Washington University. Paul has written seven books on security, peace and African conflicts, which include, amongst others; *The International Politics of Mass Atrocities: The Case of Darfur*, *Peace Operations and Global Order* and *Understanding Peacekeeping*. He also manages

² Fiona Terry, *Condemned to Repeat?* p.39

the Providing for Peacekeeping Project, an independent research project which analyzes how to develop more effective United Nations peacekeeping operations.