

Warfare in Independent Africa

Reviewed by Floor Keuleers

Abstract

Reno, William. *Warfare in Independent Africa*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011, 271 pp.

With his new book *Warfare in Independent Africa*, William Reno joins the many authors trying to better understand intrastate war. A large proportion of that literature looks for macro-level variables that are linked to the incidence of conflict, through their impact on rebel motivation. This results in claims ranging from the omnipresent greed-grievance debate -with Paul Collier (2000) as a prominent proponent of the greed hypothesis and Frances Stewart's theory of horizontal inequalities (2002) offering perhaps the most nuanced grievance story – to alternative accounts like Homer-Dixon's work (1994) on resource degradation and population growth.

Warfare in Independent Africa differs from this body of work in its choice of both dependent and explanatory variables. Rebel motivation is not at the core of its explanatory framework, as Reno argues that

[...] individuals who make up rebel groups [...] usually exhibit a broad range of motives for fighting [...] These motives are consistent in their appearances in conflict after conflict, but this analysis focuses on the more important processes that shape how fighters end up fighting and how they get socialized into privileging some motives over others. (p. 34)

In this sense Reno echoes Collier's shift towards a focus on the feasibility and financial sustainability of rebellion (2001). Collier's work however, like that of Stewart and Homer-Dixon, is still geared towards explaining the *incidence* of conflict. By contrast, Reno's aim is to "examine the history of armed conflicts in Africa to explain how and why the groups that fought in them have evolved" (p. 3)

This focus on the *nature* of rebellion reminds us of Weinstein's *Inside Rebellion*, which sought to explain "why patterns of insurgent violence vary so much across conflicts" (2007: 6). But where Weinstein deemed the key variation to lie in the type of rebel recruited ('committed investors' versus 'consumers'), Reno repeatedly refutes the assertion that potential rebels have fixed attributes of that kind, arguing for example that 'some of the 1990s warlord rebel recruits could have become distinguished liberation fighters in different circumstances' (p. 170). The key to understanding the evolving nature of rebellion then lies in understanding how different circumstances enable different kinds of potential rebel *leaders* to start and sustain different kinds of rebellion. According to Reno, the two crucial variables within that context are the nature of African state politics and the nature of international support for rebellion. The book's key contribution is thus that it takes the unit of analysis of the authors mentioned above –the rebel group with its various motivations- and places it firmly in a broader political context.

Reno further substantiates this central claim in two ways. Empirically, he seeks to provide an almost

encyclopaedic overview of more than 30 rebel movements in 20 African countries. Discussing rebellions throughout the entire continent save North Africa and spanning 7 decades, this book is an ambitious and admirable attempt at discerning patterns in what is a relatively long and above all very eventful period in African history.

On a conceptual level, Reno delineates five categories of rebels, which – though not mutually exclusive – are deemed to represent the evolution of rebellion since independence. Starting from the early anti-colonial and majority rule rebels, he goes on to discuss the reform rebels of the 1980s and finally the currently dominant types, warlord and parochial rebels. Despite this fairly detailed typology, however, the image the book essentially conveys is that of an underlying dichotomy, distinguishing between the first three types of rebels and the latter two. The turning point in that dichotomy is said to have come around 1990, and – in line with the central argument of the book – to have been the result mainly of changes in pre-war state politics. In trying to maintain power, regimes relied heavily on multiple security services and extensive patronage networks. This deprived potential ideological rebel leaders of the “fields of leverage” and “social spaces” that enabled their predecessors to create states-within-the-state, typified by the administration of liberated zones. Rebel leaders of a different kind, however, flourish in this political environment. Instead of genuine challengers to the regime, they are insiders, occupying important positions in pre-war patronage politics. Once the patrimonial government starts to collapse, they are in a perfect position to make their own bid for power (and the patronage resources that come with it). Apart from the ultimate aim of capturing state power, these warlords have very little in common with earlier rebels, as they disregard the welfare of non-combatants and do not try to change the system. This lack of a broad vision is shared by parochial rebels, who mainly fight in ‘service to a politician “godfather”’ (p. 208).

Though appealing in an intuitive way, it is also the recurrent focus on this dichotomy that takes away some of the power of Reno’s book. Juxtaposing again and again the purposefulness of the ideologically motivated ‘wars that made states’ (Tilly quoted in Kaldor 2007: 2) of the past with the predation, intricate patronage networks and lack of hierarchy characteristic of current rebellions, *Warfare in Independent Africa* at times reads as but a specifically African version of the ‘New Wars’ thesis (for a seminal work, see Kaldor 1999). And unfortunately, it does not wholly succeed in avoiding the oversimplification this literature has already been criticized for. It would not do justice to the subtlety of Reno’s argument to reduce his description of contemporary Africa to that of a continent devoid of ideology. As discussed, he stresses that ideological rhetoric remains popular and potential ideological leaders still exist, but that ideological rebellions have simply become impracticable. However, when it comes to his description of the conflicts that do (and did) actually take place, a number of questions should be raised. Were “international ideas” (p. 14) and “universal notions” (p. 34) really that much at the core of the rebellions before 1990? Kalyvas convincingly challenges the way in which “many scholars implicitly hold that old civil wars were motivated by broad, well-defined, clearly articulated, universalistic, ideologies of social change”, pointing out that “actors in old civil wars ... have often engaged in criminal activities, large-scale looting, and the pronounced coercion of the populations whose grievances they claimed to represent” (2001: 102-106). Similarly, we can wonder whether today’s rebellions are truly as devoid of ideas as Reno contends. In the introduction to his book *The New Wars*, Münkler states that

[...] although special attention will be paid here to the economics of war and force, this does not at all mean that ideological factors should be neglected. Ethnic-cultural tensions, and increasingly also religious convictions, play an important role in the new wars. (2005: 1-2)

These ideological elements may not be readily visible to Reno, however. His rather narrow conception of ideology as revolving around broad nationalist narratives that are recognized internationally might wrongfully exclude from the realm of ideas more local and ethnic claims.

Reno would likely refute these rebuttals by pointing out that they focus on the –according to him rather

inconsequential- motives and behavior of rank and file rebels, not their leaders. This, however, should lead us to question a key assumption of the book. How meaningful is it to characterize the nature of an entire rebellion based on the aims of its leader(s)? Reno makes a valuable contribution in pointing out that the motivations of fighters are too constant over time to explain the emergence of certain kinds of rebellions, and that we should therefore look at the important role played by leaders. But once a rebel movement exists, it seems rather unlikely that the large mass of rank-and-file members will behave exactly as planned by the top. Reno's assumption that rebel leaders have a very high degree of control over not only the actions of their fighters but indeed even over their minds ('socializing them into privileging some motives over others' p. 34) is another reason for his overstating the differences between past and present rebellions.

A third source of Reno's bias in favour of past wars might lie in his methodology. Recounting the story of anti-colonial and majority rule rebels, he relies mainly on works written several decades ago – a period in which “coherent conceptual categories along the familiar left-right axis” (Kalyvas, 2001: 108) were readily available. In contrast, Reno's description of warlord and parochial rebels is based on a combination of his own research and recent works by others. It seems quite plausible that the discourses on new wars and the economic agendas of rebels have been important (though not necessarily intended) conceptual lenses in such recent analyses, while being much less present at the time the other accounts were written. Change is not only to be found in reality itself, but also in the frameworks used to describe that reality (Newman, 2004: 185).

In sum, while laudable for its attempt to 'bring the state back in' as an explanatory variable and very rich in empirical material, *Warfare in Independent Africa* insufficiently transcends the by now well-known old-new wars divide.

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University for Peace

