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**Nation is a convention: *why nations fail?***

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**Abstract**

In the analysis to be developed, we start from the assumption that is probably not necessarily the extractive approach that occurs in states that would be the cause of the "failure of nations" (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012). We assume that not all the nations fail when their respective states fail. Notwithstanding the failure of the state and its governance, the nation fails when the convention on which it exists loses comparative strength and, consequently, results in fragmentation of the territory of the nation-state. However, beyond the conventional basis, it is likely that the origin of the failure of nations is in itself historical approach to the territorial legitimacy of the nation-state.

**Keywords:** territorial legitimacy, autonomy, nation-state, convention and failure.

## Nation is a convention: *why nations fail?*

Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson,<sup>1</sup> economists, said recently that there is a correspondence between the disastrous effects of extractive governance in countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America, namely, Zimbabwe, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Colombia, North Korea, etc., and the failure of the nation in these countries.

“NATIONS FAIL TODAY because their extractive economic institutions do not create the incentives needed for people to save, invest, and innovate. Extractive political institutions support these economic institutions by cementing the power of those who benefit from the extraction. Extractive economic and political institutions, though their details vary under different circumstances, are always at the root of this failure. (...) In some extreme cases (...) extractive institutions pave the way for complete state failure, destroying not only law and order but also even the most basic economic incentives. The result is economic stagnation and (...) civil wars, mass displacements, famines, and epidemics, making many of these countries poorer today than they were in the 1960s.”<sup>2</sup>

It should be made clear in the work of these authors their notions of nation and failure, as well as the distinctions that they set between nation and state. So that we can answer the question when, indeed, nations fail? Referring to situations of governance similar to African cases that were mentioned by these authors, I. William Zartman places them in the context of state collapse.<sup>3</sup> The argument that nations fail because of disastrous governance in some states is questionable for two reasons: because there is a real difference between the nation and the state, and second, because nations fail when territorial fragmentation takes place nationwide. Nations do not always fail when the state fails. The failure of the state may not directly result in the failure or end of the nation. However, the opposite happens. The failure of the nation consequently results in the end of the state. Although is acceptable Ernest Gellner's assertion, according to which "There is no doubt that the state emerged without the help of the nation",<sup>4</sup> it seems permissible to see that, ultimately, the state is dependent on the nation. That is, with

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<sup>1</sup> Acemoglu, D. e Robinson, J. A. Why the nations fail: the origins of power, prosperity, and poverty. New York: Crown Business, 2012.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. pp. 372-373.

<sup>3</sup> Zartman, I. William. Introduction: Posing the problem of state collapse. In Zartman, I. William (edr.). Collapsed states: The disintegration and restoration of legitimate authority. Boulder, London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1995.

<sup>4</sup> Gellner, Ernest. Nações e nacionalismo. Trans. Inês Vaz Pinto. Lisboa: Gradiva, 1993, p. 19.

the failure of the nation, organized under conventional territory, consequently, the state ceased to exist.

More than you think is the nation rather than the state itself, the historical entity that most articulated in the consecration of post-colonial territories in Africa. The extreme crisis<sup>5</sup> of most African states by no means resulted in territorial fragments. How can you explain the extreme crisis of most of these states, despite the social fragmentation that were followed, not led to the fragmentation of their countries?

### The false parental origin of nations

It's easy to say that there're nation  $x$  or  $y$ ,<sup>6</sup> but as it proceeds this way, it is hard not to acknowledge articulations of convenience underlying nationalist processes. Often seems to be quite comfortable defining nation as a social formation. Supposedly assumed, therefore, that such process is, in its imaginary, open and convergent. „*For, in so far as the nation is a form that is never finally achieved, but is always being developed, its features are the outcome of incremental cultural, social and political processes.*“<sup>7</sup> What is also a plausible justification when there is no how to define what, indeed, is the nation.

Despite recognizing the importance of the historical context of industrial-liberal formation of modern western nations from eighteenth-century, Anthony Smith admits pre-modern ethno-symbolic references for the historical origin of these nations: „*the modern nation, to become truly a ,nation', requires the unifying myths, symbols and memories of pre-*

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<sup>5</sup> See Acemoglu, D. e Robinson, J. A. Why the nations fail... op.cit., 2012; Zartman, I. William (edr.). Collapsed states... op.cit., 1995.

<sup>6</sup> „The term nationalism has traditionally been used to express two broad categories of political expression of the nation:

On the one hand, it can express the resistance of a nation which is submitted to a political context which is not perceived as being positive by all or part of its people: it is the nationalism of, or within, oppressed nations. I have already mentioned occupied Poland, but other examples include Arab nationalism (...), Kurdistan, the Basque Country, Ireland, Tibet, Chechnya, and so forth.

On the other hand, it may express the nationalism of oppressive nation-states: Nazism, pan-Sinism, as well as French or Portuguese colonialism which are also a form of nationalism since they attempted to impose their nation (not only their domination but also their identity) on other peoples.

(...) But they still have a point in common: they are the product of an existing nation or of the nation-state of that nation.“ Cahen, Michel. Anticolonialism & nationalism: deconstructing synonymy, investigating historical processes. Notes on the heterogeneity of former african colonial portuguese areas. In: Morier-Genoud, Eric. Sure Road? Nationalisms in Angola, Guinea-Bissau and Mozambique. ... pp. 18-19.

<sup>7</sup> Smith, Anthony D. The antiquity of nations. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008, p. 16.

*modern ethnies*.<sup>8</sup> The ideal-type<sup>9</sup> nation to Anthony Smith is not less controversial, because it tends to minimize the corporate and conventional elements presiding ethnic identification. In fact, the difficulty lies in defining the nation, because at the exact moment it comes in defining it territorially it becomes a convention, consecrating themselves, in effect, the conveniences both internal and regional or international.

The lack of consensus about the origin of the nation lies, as it seems, in the concept of nation. In this study, our historical analysis of the origin of the nation derives from the notion that it is a convention. Which means that the conventions that shape nations follow the degree of intensification of regional relations. I mean that in a certain region, as well as there are much more intense territorial relations, the greater will be the nationalists conventions. These conventions respond to claims of legitimacy and territorial autonomy.

The national conventions, to say the nations themselves, have their historical origin in the parental presumption or affirmation; even so, the nations are not absolute parental composites. The parental territorial units integrate regional migrant groups.<sup>10</sup>

Based on this conceptual notes, how to define the post-colonial nations in Africa? They do not arise from the conventions established on the regional extension of parental relationships. They have their origin in an anomalous historical phenomenon. They originated from the mass production of the western industrial machine of the end of nineteenth-century.

To answer the question why the "strong states"<sup>11</sup> of authoritarian and totalitarian regimes of twentieth-century failed, Francis Fukuyama came to notice that the internal cause was the circumstantial support of the structure of ideology:

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<sup>8</sup> Smith, A. The antiquity of nations... op.cit., p. 44.

<sup>9</sup> "On this account, we may define nation as a named and self-defined human community whose members cultivate common myths, memories and symbols, possess a distinctive public culture, occupy a historic homeland, and observe common laws and shared customs." Anthony D. The antiquity of nations... op.cit. p. 17.

<sup>10</sup> MacDonald, Duff. *Africana: the heart of heathen Africa*. Vol. 1 Native Customs and Beliefs. London: Dawson's of Pall Mall, 1969, pp. 154-156.

<sup>11</sup> „The state in a liberal democracy is by definition weak: preservation of a sphere of individual rights means a sharp delimitation of its power. Authoritarian regimes on the Right and Left, by contrast, have sought to use power of the state to encroach on the private sphere and to control it for various purposes – whether to build military strength, to promote an egalitarian social order, or to bring about a rapid economic growth. What was lost in the realm of individual liberty was to be regained at the level of national purpose.“ Fukuyama, Francis. *The end of history and the last man*. New York: Free Press, 2006, p. 15. „Totalitarianism sought to destroy civil society in its entirety, in its search for ‚total‘ control over the lives of its citizens.“ Fukuyama, The end of history... op.cit. 2006, p. 24.

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“The critical weakness that eventually toppled these strong states was in the last analysis a failure of legitimacy – that is, a crisis on the level of ideas. Legitimacy is not justice or right in an absolute sense; it is a relative concept that exists in people’s subjective perceptions. All regimes capable of effective action must be based on some principle of legitimacy.”<sup>12</sup>

Fukuyama also considers the possibility that the support structure of one or another principle of legitimacy was ultimately associated with the mismatch between the type of governance characteristic of totalitarian states, especially when their expectative impacts showed up negative, and democracy.

To Abrahamsson & Nilsson, who in the 1990s is one of the early references of academic literature emerging in Mozambique to study the question of political legitimacy of the Mozambican state, the concept of legitimacy is defined as governance.<sup>13</sup>

“In a simplified way, it can be said that the legitimacy of a nation-state as a form of political organization, can be based on the extent to which it can ensure the survival of the population in the long term and offer a vision of the future. If the nation-state can not achieve these goals, people seek other forms of association. Experience shows that in Africa, the first alternative is the family, clan, ethnicity and institutions of traditional society. If there are not alternatives that can achieve legitimacy quickly, the only possible result is the disintegration.”<sup>14</sup>

It seems to us that it is possible to reverse the field of view to define the concept of territorial legitimacy. Consider two principles: first, that the territorial legitimacy does not accept any form of protection or domination that eventually an entity may exercise, and second, that obedience or recognition of any form of domination lies at the level of political conformism. In support of this last principle, we believe that in any situation that occurs administration, conformity takes place when social units under subjection lack the ordinary or extraordinary comparative forces to enable them to counter the imposing dominant force opposing their claim of territorial legitimacy.

Rather than think of legitimacy as popular recognition, territorial legitimacy could be seen as the statement on a right of administrative primacy, or rather the historical affirmation of the primacy for right of administration over a particular territory. A statement that emanate from an apparent parental relationship with a particular territory in question, on which in

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<sup>12</sup> Fukuyama, op.cit. 2006, p. 15.

<sup>13</sup> Abrahamsson, Hans e Nilsson, Anders. *Ordem mundial futura e governação nacional em Moçambique*. Maputo: Padriгу e CEEI-ISRI, 1998, p. 37.

<sup>14</sup> Abrahamsson, Hans e Nilsson, Anders. *Moçambique em Transição: um estudo da história de desenvolvimento durante o período 1974-1992*. Trad. Dulce Leiria. 1<sup>a</sup> ed. Maputo: Padriгу e CEEI-ISRI, March 1994, p. 277. Translation not from the original.

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ordinary conditions is not expected an assignment of the right to an external entity, in the form of protection or tutelarship. Hence, the eventuality of the political legitimacy of a state or political entity is ultimately undermined by popular affirmation of territorial legitimacy, which does not emanate from the government but from an assertion of a right to territorial primacy. It is this fundamental aspect of the theoretical distinction between political legitimacy<sup>15</sup> and territorial legitimacy, which would explain the eventuality of recognition or acceptance of the principles of political legitimacy, and can be applied to thinking about the legitimacy of the nation-state or post-colonial nations.

Colonial and post-colonial states justified their claim of legitimacy or right to territorial administrative primacy based on a principle recognized or accepted in a specific historical context of regional or international political relations. It is this recognition or acceptance that is the theoretical basis of what we call convention.

### **The nation is a convention**

The nation is not a sentiment, and not even the result of a national conscience. The parental claims of territorial legitimacy are false evidence of an alleged existence of a national territory. There is no nation that is not a convention. Thus, one would predict that nations as they appear in the world political map is circumstantial and eventual. Which mean that the modification of the terms that governed the formation of a nation would bring to end the existence of this nation. We could identify two forces that determine the creation and failure of nations: a regional-corporative force and a international-corporative force. The creation or the end of a nation can occur in interdependence between these forces. This may have been the case for the post-colonial African nations in which the position of the regional organizations enshrines the previous position of the international ones. Given this fact, I would say that the history of nations is made of parental theses applied to justify territorial legitimacy or right to claim administration primacy over a given territory. However, no individual parental thesis prevail in force comparatively to the corporative-international conventions that determine the geopolitical existence of the nation concerned.

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<sup>15</sup> Weber, Max. *Economia e sociedade: fundamentos da sociologia compreensiva*. Vol.1. Brasília: Universidade de Brasília, 2012, p. 141.

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The nation is a convention because it is the expression of strength or ability of an international corporate system that consign political legitimacy to a functional and favorable claim of territorial independence. Which is equivalent to saying that is not a separatist or nationalist assertion about a particular territory which makes possible the existence of a nation, but the effective force of terms previously agreed convenient to the international corporate system that consecrate a national territorial affirmation. The territorial terms of such convention, agreement or treaty will be durable while is unchanged the ordinary force of the international corporate system.

In this process, the post-colonial system is functional acknowledgment of political legitimacy of the claims for independence, whose recognition is due to the condition to safeguard fully the former colonial territory concerned. It means that the post-colonial African nations do not represent, as is often believed, a social or popular identity. In fact, they are a territorial identity. Since it is the proclaimed former colonial territory that preceded the nation, not the opposite. For the post-colonial system, what matters in the relationship it maintains with the post-colonial societies is mainly consecrated former colonial territory. Instead, the nation is a secondary element when compared to consecrated territory. It matters little whether or not there are a feeling or consciousness, multiple or plural statements or mythical and historical nationalists narratives within the territory, since the conflicts that take place in it can not threaten or endanger the consecration and the existence of that territory.

Paradoxically, the post-colonial system constitute in a former colonial territory the interaction of two spheres: one of these is the post-colonial nation and the other sphere is the international corporate system. Within the post-colonial territories interact positively and favorably nationalistic narratives that represent the sphere of relations and conflicts, be they ethnic, civil, military or other, and the strength that represents the international corporate system. The latter chairs the recognition of legitimacy to a positive and favorable nationalist statement or nation-state. Which is not to say that the existence of a post-colonial state economically stable is not an important ally in the renowned former colonial territory.

However, the recognition of independence to former colonial territories has to be interpreted as a significant shift in hegelian paradigm over the colonies, without, however, be a radical rupture from conventions that justified colonial imperialism. The consecration of the nation corresponding to the former colonial territory is representative of this incomplete

rupture of the hegelian colonial paradigm. The recognition of legitimacy to political independence within the former colonial territorial limits does not result from changes on the ordinary force in colonial system. Unlike what seems, selectively the terms of the previously consigned colonial relationship has been refurbished and replicated by the post-colonial system in the relationship established with the independent state. The recognition of political legitimacy to the realm of post-colonial nations can not be interpreted as a consequence of having formed a situation of comparative strength beside colonized and post-colonial societies enough to put in check the post-colonial system. In fact, and only, the former colonial territories was partially conceded to the freedoms of nations to administrate their respective states within the pre-determined territorial limits.

It is within this framework of post-colonial analysis that we understand Ilya Prizel, for whom nationalism and „national identity“ eventually result in positive impacts on the domestic and external policies in some countries.

“First, a polity cannot exist in a state of prolonged anomy; it needs an identity to provide a psychological frame of reference in which to function. Therefore all polities, whether or not they are aware of it, have an identity that helps define their values and priorities, along with a host of objective factors, shape foreign as well as domestic policy. [Second] Polities experience ‘teachable moments’ when confronted with crisis, either internal or external. Thus, sometimes within as little as a generation, a polity’s identity may be redefined, leading to a new self-vision and a new set of priorities.”<sup>16</sup>

Analogously to the perception according to which the collapse of communism should not be summarized only in the victory of liberal democracy, “but rather [as] the implosion of a ‘universalist’ polity when confronted with the nationalist idea.”<sup>17</sup> is possible, certainly, to admit that the anti-colonial nationalism and independence have been an extraordinary force in the territories and colonized continents that had been able to determine the achievement of national independence. But this must not lead us not to admit the limits of this extraordinary force on the issue of former colonial territories. The question remains the same if the consecration of these territories was not calculated by the independence elites as strategic condition for conquest or negotiation of “national” independence, along with the social, political and military anti-colonial movement? Therefore, the point of consensus for peace and the establishment of the nation-state!

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<sup>16</sup> Prizel, Ilya. National identity and foreign policy: nationalism and leadership in Poland, Russia and Ukraine. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004, p. 2.

<sup>17</sup> Prizel, Ilya. National identity... op.cit. p. 5.



This is not to refute the theoretical and historical position of the international force of nationalism. But in the context of relationship between post-colonial nations, especially in Africa, and the post-colonial international system, to question the assertion made by Ilya Prizel that the “Nationalism will likely remain the world’s most potent political force for foreseeable future”,<sup>18</sup> to opposes those who portend possible anachronism of nationalism in the future.

The underlying notion of the international postcolonial system that we have analyzed in this study is less positive than that presented by Ilya Prizel, because we assume that, with respect to post-colonial nations, the position of the post-colonial international system is previously deterministic and can their position of strength determine, ultimately, the fragmentation or failure of given post-colonial nation.

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<sup>18</sup> Prizel, Ilya. National identity... op.cit., 2004, p. 7.

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