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AFRICAN WEAK STATES AND COMMERCIAL ALLIANCES

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Abstract

Conventional analyses of Africa's 'failed states' conclude that patronage networks fragment as state resources decline. As payoffs from rulers decline, once-loyal strongmen become warlords, attacking centralized authority. This article examines how rulers of weak states actually manage increasingly threatening patronage networks. The cases of Angola and Sierra Leone show how rulers use more reliable foreign mining firms and foreign private (mercenary) armies to marginalize threatening strongmen. At home, militarising commerce denies its benefits to enterprising strongmen. Rulers then receive creditor financial support for their offensives against elements of their old patronage network and insurgencies, seeming to battle corruption and inefficiency. Rulers discover that they can use foreign firms to collect revenue, defend territory and conduct diplomacy with other states and multilateral agencies more reliably then domestic bureaucrats or strongmen whose political authority may threaten their own. This new political alliance increases the economic viability of some weak states. Paradoxically, the destruction of conventional state institutions eases the hard pressed ruler's efforts to recruit aid from global society and manage the demands of competition in global markets.

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