

The Economics of Peace and Security Journal

© www.epsjournal.org.uk, ISSN 1749-852X

Book Review

Soares de Oliveira, Ricardo. 2007. *Oil and Politics in the Gulf of Guinea*. London: Hurst and Company. xiv + 379 pp. ISBN 978-1-85065-858-0 (paperback). Price: £20.00.

by Steen Nordstrøm (10 February 2008)

Few books manage to be theoretically innovative, empirically founded, and well-written at the same time. *Oil and Politics in the Gulf of Guinea* is one of them.

The book's main claim is that oil and politics are so closely interwoven in the Gulf of Guinea region that the nexus has created a unique kind of state that is essentially failing, yet puzzlingly persistent. The "successful failed state" is born. It is failing because economic development outside the oil sector is absent along with its ability to tax, create infrastructure, and deliver social services to its citizens. Even the quintessential state characteristics of monopoly of violence and ability to govern space are missing and often outsourced to oil companies. Therein lies the explanation of state survival. The petro-states around the Gulf of Guinea owe their continued existence to an international system with a ferocious appetite for energy and the notion that granting concessions is the business of internationally recognized states. This gives rise to a form of realpolitik where local elites are allowed to maintain power and prosper at the expense of the general public as long as they enable oil deals to be created. Given the continuous growth of international energy demand and interest in diversifying supply, the author suggests that this peculiar type of petro-state with all its shortcomings will remain in existence for the foreseeable future.

Oil and politics have been studied in tandem for decades, and recently much attention has been paid to the adverse societal effects of hydrocarbons on the African continent. In the civil war literature countries' reliance on oil exports often figures as a prominent explanatory factor for the prevalence of internal war or attempts of secession. Likewise, the state formation and "resource curse" literatures have dealt intensively with maladies in the form of stalled economic development, political authoritarianism, corruption, and human insecurity often found in oil economies. Soares de Oliveira's book manages to add to all of these literatures.

For those interested in understanding the oil and violence relation, the book provides insights about the finer mechanisms that result in the nexus. When the state's functional reach contracts, and it becomes clear that its territory can be divided into useful (i.e., oil rich) and useless spaces, rebels and secessionists might be tempted to challenge the weak state. However, the state often manages to fight off the challenge because the old, power-wielding elite can rely on support from local clients, international supporters, and private military companies.

Readers whose primary interest is oil's adverse effects on economic development and political freedom will find the development of the "successful failed state" thesis interesting. Soares de Oliveira demonstrates how the close relationship between state and oil companies have developed over time and how this relationship has become an inescapable, omnipresent factor in regional politics. Slowly states have been emptied of functions (to the extent they ever possessed them) but their national oil companies and international contacts allows them to persevere.

The book offers solid empirical evidence for its claims. It is, of course, first and foremost an area-study book that relies on elite interviews and secondary sources to analyze politics in the oil-producing states in the Gulf of Guinea region. At times it appears that Soares de Oliveira could have used his study to offer contingent generalizations about oil politics elsewhere in the world and certainly in other parts of the African continent. But clearly there is a trade-off between such generalizations and in-depth studies of a few countries. The real value of the empirical analysis lies in the scrutiny of oil politics in the Gulf of Guinea from every relevant angle: strategies of and consequences for national elites, national and international oil companies, and the populations affected by the dealings in the oil industry are all described and leave the reader with a good understanding of what is at stake from the different perspectives. Most other work in the field approaches the topic from just one angle.

If there is one place where the book falls short, it is on the lack of explicit methodological considerations about the homogeneity of the region and the information ideally needed to sustain the theoretical claims. To what extent are the individual countries in the region comparable? Is there a systematic difference between old and new oil producers, or between countries that have recently emerged from civil war (Angola) and countries that have more stable pasts (Cameroon)? And what pieces of information would be needed to sustain the various claims in the book? Granted, Soares de Oliveira does briefly address the difficulty gaining access to the companies and decisionmakers that possess the desired information and notes that “the narrative is episodic and a function of the issues I have prioritised” (p. 11). That might be enough for a purely descriptive study but the bold and highly thought-stimulating claims made in this book deserve more consideration about how the narrative’s content is best created. This shortcoming is, however, unlikely to have substantial bearing on the main conclusions about state characteristics and the role of oil in the Gulf of Guinea region.

The book offers relevant and interesting insights to scholars working in such different spheres as state formation, African politics, and energy security. It is highly recommended.

Steen Nordstrøm is a Ph.D. candidate at the Danish Institute for International Studies.