PERSISTING CHALLENGES OF THE INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS ANALYSIS:

Big Men Politics, State Fragmentation, and Local Power in the Horn of Africa

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ABSTRACT: *The Horn of Africa comprises some of the most fragile and fragmented states in the world. This poses a persistent challenge to the dominant realist international relations discourse that is used to explain the dynamics of foreign relations in the Horn of Africa mainly from the perspective of extra-African powers. Discussing Big Man politics and state fragmentation as key characteristics of political dynamics in the Horn of Africa, the article points out the epistemological inapplicability of the mainstream realist international relations discourse to understand power in African politics and international affairs. The paper asserts that the role and dynamics of domestic power contestation among Big Men and how it relates to state fragmentation should be understood to improve international relations discourse and its ability to make sense of politics in the Horn of Africa. Explaining the contrasting realities of Big Man political competition in Djibouti and Eritrea, and Ethiopia and Somalia, the article emphasizes the need to improve our understanding of the local power of the Big Men and their international connections*

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in the context of fragmentation of state power as a way to improve the analysis of politics and international relations in the Horn of Africa.

KEYWORDS: *international relations, Big Men politics, state fragmentation, local power, the Horn of Africa*

INTRODUCTION

The Horn of Africa is a very culturally diverse and resource-rich region. Narrowly defined, it consists of Ethiopia, Somalia, Eritrea, and Djibouti, but broader definitions often include the countries directly neighboring these core states, namely Sudan, South Sudan, and Kenya. According to various indexes, the Horn contains mainly authoritarian and some of the most fragile states in the world (Fund for Peace, n.d.; Economist Intelligence Unit 2023; Freedom House 2023). In the Horn of Africa, authoritarian rule based on a narrow framing of exclusionary identity politics and competing ethnic, clan, and cultural, societal formation has persisted as two contrasting forces related to states and their internal political dynamics. These complexities, in part emanating from a colonial and imperial (Ethiopia) legacy, have shaped governance and relations among groups and perpetrated identity politics dynamics leading to state fragmentation. These forces have produced a political reality in which informal practices largely prevail within the state. Notably, the so-called "Big Men" engage in competition for political and economic power. Big Men are prominent individuals hailing from various societal groups, who among themselves form the elite (Bayart 1993, 60–86; Daloz 2003). Following anthropologists' earlier depictions of Big Men in Oceania (Godelier 1986; Godelier and Strathern 1991), Africanist scholars have shown how Big Men are dominant political and economic actors in the African context by serving as societal status-based power centers, or nodes, that accumulate, command, and redistribute financial and material resources along patron-client networks (Utas 2012). In Africa, Big Men are official state figures, prominent societal non-state personalities, or both, using their official and/or societal status to improve their political and economic position. In their contestation for power, the Big Men, who buy loyalty from followers with reputational or material assets to gain and maintain prominence seek to obtain and exercise influence over their rivals. While the Big Men have various ways to accumulate resources, the ultimate prize in their competition is often controlling the state and the associated opportunities for enrichment and elevating their power and personal status (Markakis 1987, xvii). In the Horn of Africa,

the Big Men dominate the political and economic landscape in particularly institutionally fragile and informal states, which emphasizes their importance as individual, and largely autonomous, power centers.

A political system in which the state is institutionally fragile, unable to concentrate power, and maintain ultimate authority and legitimacy among people in much of its territory is often subject to severe forms of power competition that occur largely outside the state's formal institutional framework (Clapham 1996; 1998; Markakis, Schlee, and Young 2021). This contestation ranges from a relatively peaceful struggle to armed violence and insurgencies and results in various degrees of state decay (Bah 2012; Clapham 2017), as well as fragmentation along the fault lines between competing political identity-based, Big Man-led groups and organizations. The state's institutional fragility and inability to concentrate power further enables Big Men not only to compete as largely independent power centers but also to develop and exercise largely autonomous relationships with foreign actors through which they obtain resources for their domestic power contestation. This propels the intensification of power competition and the deepening of political identity-based divisions between Big Men constituencies, advancing state fragmentation. State fragmentation is, therefore, the relative weakening of the Big Man ruler's state-associated power relative to his Big Men competitors and the strengthening of their rival power centers.[1] This reduces the power of the ruling Big Man, and although he still benefits from state control he is increasingly challenged by the Big Men contenders. In essence, then, state fragmentation is about the shifting of relative power from the governing Big Man toward the competitors and a manifestation of fierce power competition among these power centers in the context of an institutionally fragile state. At times, as in the Horn of Africa, state fragmentation can be a remarkably enduring systemic condition that does not necessarily follow or give rise to state failure. But on other occasions, depending on the degree to which the non-state Big Men and their constituencies challenge the state, it may lead to state collapse or disintegration. As such, the degree of state fragmentation is largely determined by the severity of Big Men power competition and the associated violence that weakens state power relative to the societal (non-state) actor power centers, as well as the extent to which Big Men engage foreign partners for resources and manage to increase their local power (Ylönen 2023a; 2023b). This poses a persistent challenge to the dominant analytical frames used to explain the Horn of Africa's international relations and position in regional and international politics.

In the Horn, the politics of state fragmentation is characterized by the power contestation of prominent societally embedded Big Men.

Power rivalries among these influential societal players and the privatization of the state and its resources in this contestation in the conditions of state fragility and limited government authority and legitimacy (Jackson and Rosberg 1982) drive state fragmentation. When contesting power, locally or nationally, Big Men and their supporters may be confronted by state agents, but, due to the fragility of the state, authority is often negotiated between the state and societal actors (Hagmann and Péclard 2010). The lack of authoritative and legitimate institutions in fragile states in the Horn results in much of the severely violent forms of power contestation taking place outside the institutional framework of the state. When state institutions are in the hands of a narrow Big Man authoritarian government leadership, as in the case of the Horn of Africa, limits on the use of violent coercion and channels for peaceful competition for political and economic power are few. Thus, power contestation among Big Men is likely to take a violent form, which promotes division and state fragmentation, as power and authority is appropriated by various power centers led by competing Big Men. The fragmentation of state power also leads to the governments' inability to monopolize foreign relations, which the Big Men, as relatively autonomous local power centers, also use to gain external resources for their domestic political and economic rivalries. Finally, their local power constrains the behavior of their foreign partners, resulting in the domestic political dynamics having international consequences.

This article discusses how Big Men political contestation in the context of significant state fragility may lead to the fragmentation of state power and strengthening of Big Man local power centers that exercise their autonomous foreign relations. While pointing to the Horn of Africa's big and small authoritarian states, Ethiopia and Somalia, and Djibouti and Eritrea, it shows how the fragmentation of state power due to Big Men competition is greater when the leading Big Man in control of the government has been unable to prevent the rise of competing Big Man power centers. However, the political reality of Big Men politics and power contestation has not formed part of the dominant strands of international relations analysis of the Horn of Africa subregion, which suffers from the persisting challenge of how to grasp the agency that arises from domestic political dynamics. Highlighting theoretical aspects, the article emphasizes the domestic competition for power among the leading state and societal (non-state) actors and the consequences of their contestation in relationships with external players. The article argues for the significance of state fragmentation and local power to show that domestic state and societal actors in the Horn of Africa exercise important agency in their foreign relations, constraining

and guiding the behavior of external players, which has international consequences. In this way, the analysis challenges the still-dominant realist international relations discourse that portrays the Horn as a passive target of external influence and intervention.

Moreover, the article shows that the institutional fragility of the authoritarian state provides the setting for political competition, instability, and armed conflict in which the powerful state and societal actors are their main players. The incapacity of formal institutions, and the rulers' willingness to undermine them to secure their ruling position, moves power competition largely beyond the state. Severe forms of Big Men power contestation lead to the fragmentation of state power and competing power centers. This is why the Big Man state leader seeks to prevent the rise of potential rivals by concentrating power.

Finally, to obtain resources for strengthening themselves in their domestic power rivalries and conflicts, state and societally powerful Big Men seek to establish pragmatic and transactional partnerships with external players. In their external affairs, the state-associated and non-state Big Men and their organizations project local power to attract, interact with, and constrain foreign actors. The article, therefore, advocates for the incorporation of states' internal political dynamics, namely the leading state and societal actors and their rivalries, into the international relations analysis to generate more realistic narratives of politics and international affairs in the Horn of Africa. Given that concepts of "state" and "power" based on Western (hegemonic) understandings continue to play a key role in the current realist international relations discourse, their reconfiguration and adaptation to the African political reality is crucial for gaining a more accurate understanding of the agency of Horn actors in their foreign engagements.

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS ANALYSIS AND STATE FRAGILITY IN AFRICA

As a disciplinary subfield of political science, international relations, and particularly its realist discourse, is firmly rooted in a narrative of the European experience of state formation, Western political development, and conduct of state-centric foreign relations (Ylönen 2022a, 45–49; 2023b, 389, 402). The realist approach forms a dominant doctrine within the discipline and particularly its subfields, strategic and security studies. The emergence of the field of international relations in the United States and Europe during the early decades of the 20th century owed largely to the need to explain international politics and issues of war and peace among great powers. As a result, the foundational works

in international relations are considered "realist" and deal with foreign affairs of great powers and relations between powerful (nation-) states (Carr 1939; Morgenthau 1948). This realist strand has relied heavily on the idea of the nation-state as the key actor in the international system and power relations between such states as an important aspect of understanding foreign policy behavior (Ylönen 2022a, 46–48; 2023b, 389, 393).

In the realist approach, the assumption is that the government of a sovereign state is internally all-powerful. Because this form of polity is considered a nation-state, the society is assumed to be homogeneous and able to express its national interest uniformly so that the government pursues it in its foreign policy, but this did not fit the postcolonial state (Bah 2005, 29; Bah and Emmanuel 2024, 40). In its international affairs, the state is therefore considered a unitary entity because the government is believed to monopolize and coordinate the country's foreign relations so that it speaks with one voice. Power simply derives from resources that governments have converted into capabilities and is narrowly defined as a relative concept between unitary state entities. More powerful states are assumed to have the capacity to constrain the behavior of their weaker counterparts due to asymmetrical relationships (Womack 2016). While classical realism largely disregards states' internal political, economic, and social dynamics, newer interpretations, particularly neoclassical realism, seek to selectively include them (Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell 2016). But even it continues to perceive states' overall foreign relations as monolithic (Ylönen 2023b, 389).

However, the realist unitary state-centric and territorial sovereignty-based discourse fails to account for the reality of politics in the "weak, collapsed, and failed states in Africa" (Dunn 2000, 62). Its epistemological foundations and ontological composition do not permit the understanding of the intertwined nature of their political dynamics, which combines domestic and international spheres (Harman and Brown 2013, 73–74; Ylönen and Záhořík 2017; Bah 2024). While Douglas Lemke (2003, 2011) has correctly argued that excessive focus on the state as the main unit of analysis in the international relations research on Africa results in its inability to provide a feasible understanding of the political reality of Africa's international affairs, another shortcoming related to the conceptualization of state is the narrow interpretation of power on an interstate basis. Thus, Africa is often studied as a powerless object of greater power involvement and intervention (Croft 1997, 609).

Drawing on the state as its main unit of analysis, the realist international relations discourse adopts a limited interpretation of power. In

the realist view, the state is the only actor pursuing meaningful foreign relations, and since states are the principal unitary international actors, power is exercised between them. This perspective is aimed at capturing power in what is perceived as a states-based international system and is heavily used in strategic and security analysis. But because it is based on the idea of states as domestically all-powerful entities, realists pay no adequate attention to the sources and manifestations of sub-state-level power dynamics. However, these are paramount to understanding politics and international relations in institutionally fragile states where power is dispersed among various state and societal actor power centers that actively maintain variably autonomous international linkages (Ylönen 2022a; 2023b). Thus, the conceptualization of power in the realist discourse is inherently narrow and glaringly excludes the complex interplay between various state and non-state actors in the interconnected domestic and international spheres.

Moreover, ignoring the reality of relational power between the multitude of state and non-state actors in fragile states, the realist paradigm, as it stands, is ill-suited for analyzing Africa's international relations. This is because in African states governments often face powerful and relatively autonomous non-state actors and are unable to monopolize the country's most important external connections. Instead, in most institutionally fragile states in the continent, some of which are in the Horn of Africa, powerful individuals (Big Men) and their groups and organizations, a few linked to the government, often have sufficient leverage to develop and maintain their own foreign linkages. The Big Men gain such leverage through the control of material (e.g., land, human, and natural/mineral resources) and/or reputational (e.g., political and societal status, influence, and decision-making power) assets that are desirable for external actors and often engage in transactional foreign relationships through which they gain resources to strengthen themselves in their domestic power rivalries. In such contexts, understanding the distribution of societal power becomes important, including the extent of the elite control of political, economic and military institutions, and natural resources (Mills 1956). All of these tie into the capacity of the societally prominent individuals' accumulation and use of social and cultural capital, domestically and externally (Bourdieu 1977; 1984).

In expansive Somalia, for example, where the federal administration and its institutions have not been the main players exercising power for decades, political, business, clan, and religious Big Man leaders have used linkages with external partners to gain an edge in the competition against their domestic state or non-state rivals. Similarly, in the Horn's largest

and most culturally diverse state, Ethiopia, leading Big Men from various ethnic constituencies have maintained variable foreign connections while competing for power. In contrast, in the Horn of Africa's two smaller states, Djibouti and Eritrea, the ruling Big Men have been relatively successful in preventing the rise of competitors by centralizing power and monopolizing foreign relations. As a result, the state and its relations with society are at the heart of understanding contemporary political organization and dynamics in Africa. Modern African states were mostly created by the imperialist powers through the establishment of territorial demarcations and governing institutions that pursued particular ways of governance aimed at exploiting labor and extracting raw materials.

The colonial forms of the Westphalian state originating in Europe and their postcolonial successors have provided the formal structures shaping the political reality in the continent. However, largely owing to its foreign origin, and structure and characteristics that have not organically emerged from local societies, much of African politics plays out in what has often been characterized in the literature as the "informal" sphere (Bayart 1993; Bayart, Ellis, and Hibou 1999). Although under local leadership the postcolonial state became intertwined with society, this entrenched interaction produced political dynamics much different from the contemporary states in the West. In part because the governance and state institutions were not intended to accommodate representation of the colonial subjects and a wide range of social and cultural identity groups and their interests, and did not accord them with public political space similar to Western democracies, much of the everyday politics in African states after independence came to take place outside of the institutional framework of the state. In African political systems, therefore, Big Men-dominated informal patron-client networks through which state officials accumulate and use public resources for private ends have often taken precedence over formal institutions. Particularly in more authoritarian systems, as in the Horn of Africa, citizens' possibilities to influence governance and resource allocation are highly limited.

Against the background of foreign imperialist domination resulting in an urban-rural and ethnic divide, narrow political and economic elites replaced the colonizer and merged to govern (Mamdani 1996). The colonial border delineations, often dividing cultural identity groups and their territories, played a significant role in the structuration of power within African states, leading to protracted claims and disputes over territory within and between states (Asiwaju 1985; Nugent and Asiwaju 1996). In authoritarian states, in particular, the prevailing institutional power configuration and governance practices have confined high-level political competition and the accumulation of economic

fortunes to individuals, the so-called Big Men, within or associated with the governing elite. Due to the fragility and incapacity of formal state institutions and the unwillingness of the patrons of the state, competition for power between Big Men and their mainly ethnic or other identity-based constituencies often takes place informally or beyond the state. Politicizing and instrumentalizing identity has persisted as salient features in such political systems where the Big Man elite individuals command ethnic or cultural identity-based groups of followers and maintain their support through personal social status and material resources which they utilize to gain and maintain loyalty. Different combinations of these dynamics have resulted in varying levels of legitimacy and authority of African states among their citizens. Territorial divisions of postcolonial states, which the Organization of African Unity decreed as sacrosanct, divide homelands of identity groups, and those living in the (mainly rural) state peripheries are often marginalized or outright excluded from national politics taking place at the center (mostly urban areas) and face inequalities in socioeconomic well-being (Ylönen 2016). As a result, divisive and highly contested identity politics, often driven by cultural (e.g., linguistic or religious) "othering," have been among the key elements of the longstanding political turbulence and state weakness in much of Africa. Various types of statehood exist in the continent, and the limits of Western theories of statehood to interpret them remain significant (Clapham 1996; 1998).

However, despite the poor applicability of Western state theories in Africa, the discourse of state fragility, as a way to explain the alleged "weakness" of political systems in Africa (and the Global South more generally), emerged in the West. Weak states were described as dysfunctional and in need of "repair" (Rotberg 2004). This, in turn, allowed politicization and securitization of state fragility as a threat (Rotberg 2002; Bah 2024) to justify external involvement and the so-called "humanitarian" and "peace" and "state"-building interventions (Grimm, Lemay-Hebert, and Nay 2015; Ylönen 2022b, 93). Thus, although in recent decades the internal reality of the so-called fragile states has become an issue of interest, the realist international relations discourse has continued to largely ignore the international agency of their domestic actors. This unveils the realist paradigm's selective and purposive interpretation of history, or its deliberate downplaying in the name of doing positivist social science (Glencross 2015, 415–17, 425), which excludes African agency. Despite claims of historical consciousness, it tends to ignore the Western imperialist past and coercive top-down imposition of the extractive and inherently unequal and violent colonial state in much of the world.

Finally, since independence, most African states have not experienced significant pressure, such as war, to centralize power and consolidate effective state supervision of economic and societal processes (Herbst 1990). Major wars involving existential threats have been rare, but when they have occurred, they have propelled the centralization of power, as in the case of Eritrea following the Eritrean-Ethiopian War (1998–2000). Although the state structure aimed at organizing society has in part mutated according to the prevailing societal and cultural realities, this transformation has not been complete, leading to overlapping formal and informal political spaces. As a result, in Africa, many government functions and bureaucratic processes continue to take place in the shadows of official institutions and procedures. In conditions of the state's institutional fragility, Big Men power contestation manifests itself through such informality and, driven by intentionally divisive politics, creates opportune conditions for state fragmentation in which the relative power balance between state-associated Big Men and their adversaries tilts toward the latter.

BIG MEN POLITICS AND STATE FRAGMENTATION IN AFRICA

In Africa, various types of polities existed long before the 19th-century colonial wave. Although many of them carried out functions associated with the so-called "modern" European states (Warner 2001), their form and structures ranged widely. Precolonial African polities were built around a broad spectrum of societies, such as the hierarchically organized sedentary communities in the Ethiopian highlands and the horizontal pastoralist societies in the Somali-inhabited territories of the Horn of Africa (Markakis 2011, 23–44; Clapham 2017, 9–26). While a sedentary population with territorial limits enabled rulers to exert more control and centralize power, in more diffused societies extracting consistent revenue through tribute was more difficult due to lesser social control over "fairly autonomous" and mobile social actors (Migdal 1989, 34–35) without fixed territorial delimitations.

European imperialism and colonial rule imposed a highly coercive political order over local subjects in demarcated territories. European powers often had a meager presence in their African colonies and preferred either to rule indirectly through local chiefs who, once assured of their loyalty, were appointed in charge of their respective cultural identity-based communities or through minimal but direct, European-like, administration seeking to replace the preexisting local political and judicial institutions of governance. Each colonial power had its

particular governing instruments, in many cases by creating various "tribal" identity groupings resembling precolonial ethnic communities, but the general aim of administering colonies was to fuel the industrial economy of the colonial metropolis by extracting raw materials through the exploitation of labor.

States in Africa achieved independence on the foundation laid by colonial institutions, governance practices, and territorial demarcations. In most cases, narrow national Big Men ruling elites, composed of former colonial collaborators or resistance leaders, took over the administration and often reproduced exclusive, extractive, coercive, and divisive governance practices. Typically, by using the state's legal status, institutions, and resources for personal enrichment, they engaged in "predatory" governance (Frimpong-Ansah 1991; Fatton 1992), which some observers have characterized as "criminal" (Bayart, Ellis, and Hibou 1999). Many rulers of African postcolonial states became immensely rich and concentrated power to themselves, at times transforming their administrations into dictatorships. Thus, the imperialist-colonial background and posterior developments often resulted in deep-seated authoritarian governance, which converted many states essentially into the property of the Big Man rulers, the associated narrow groups of advisors, leading figures in the security apparatus, and business elites exercising political, coercive, and economic power. Appropriation and privatization of public resources weakened states and associated institutions while governing elites used their international legal recognition to enrich themselves and gain resources to maintain power (Clapham 1996; Cooper 2002). Because of the ruling Big Man appropriation of the state, the institutional channels for expressing discontent often became unavailable or lacked the capacity to manage peaceful political competition. This has led those Big Men in opposition, and their constituents and organizations, to seek more effective ways to fight for power, turning outside the state institutions and at times to violence to advance their interests. They have organized protests, revolutions, and armed insurrections that manifested discontent of the marginalized sections of society, which in many cases have been the majority.

Exclusive governance and institutional fragility in many African states, maintained and reproduced by the Big Man governance and political contestation, often result in the lack of wide-based societal legitimacy. The state is perceived with suspicion and mistrust due to coercive and predatory governance. This, however, does not mean that the African state in general is dysfunctional, but that due to its nature, it may function differently from its counterparts elsewhere. Because the state is largely exclusive, and control of it is a major path to wealth and influence, Big Men often bitterly contest state power.

Due to the prevailing informality in much of Africa, the social networks channeling reputational (nonmaterial) and material resources exist parallel to the formal institutional structures of the state. They provide an avenue for the transfer of resources without major constraints and often take precedence over formal practices and dictate how power is structured and the state is governed. Particularly in authoritarian states, Big Man rulers often capture the "shadow state" (Reno 2000; Chipkin and Swilling 2018) and treat state resources as personal property, influencing external actors' access to markets and using informal channels for doing business to enrich themselves and strengthening their personal grip on power. These types of states are often seen as examples of "illiberal" (Zakaria 1997) or "defective" (Merkel 2004) democratic order in Africa and associated with unsustainable patrimonial order propelling forms of political and economic power that lead to decaying state institutions, deteriorating conditions, and grievances (Bah 2012, 72) and in some cases state collapse and civil war (Reno 1997; 1998; 2005; Bah 2011). But the use of patrimonialism to describe African states where practices of buying loyalty (e.g., through appointments and monetary/material compensation) are prevalent has also received criticism as a misreading of Max Weber's concept based on the legitimacy of the ruler (Pitcher, Moran, and Johnson 2009).

African states' political dynamics revolve around prominent Big Men and their power rivalries. Typically, they use personal social status to accumulate resources and channel them to buy loyalty. Through their role in controlling resources, the Big Men grow their power. In the Horn of Africa, the ruling Big Men use the state to maintain their position at the helm of power while governing largely through informal, or behind-the-scenes, networks and practices in which they exchange political favors and influence for financial and economic assets. The stability of the Big Men-led system of governance mainly depends on the personal resources, both material and reputational, at the disposition of those in power and their ability to maintain the political and economic status quo by undermining rivals. However, this does not mean that the state has failed or collapsed, as state-centric arguments suggest, but that "alternative forms of governance . . . allowing ample room for violent contestations over the state" prevail (Utas 2012, 3).

Still, Big Man-led fragile states, characterized by frail state institutions, are prone to instability because their ruling regimes primarily depend on relationships and agreements between Big Man rivals. Shifts in the power balance among these prominent individuals, which depend on their success in accumulating resources and maintaining clientelist networks, may have devastating consequences for the state and societal

order. The power moving from the state-associated Big Men to their rivals strengthens the latter as alternative local power centers and diminishes the former as the main actors in domestic politics. The weakening of the most prominent Big Men in their ability to centralize power while their rivals make relative gains may result in increasingly severe contestation for political and economic power and enduring insurgencies and civil wars, as has been the case in Ethiopia and Somalia. In contrast, when Big Man rulers are able to use the state effectively to keep rivals at bay and maintain power, they may be able to impose prolonged periods of political stability, as in the case of Djibouti and Eritrea. The control of material and reputational resources plays a key role in the Big Men's ability to concentrate and maintain power over potential rivals. This enables leaders of fragile authoritarian states to maintain power and relative stability for long periods of time. But when states experience various Big Man power centers representing various politicized identity groups and the ruler lacks the will or ability to manage political competition peacefully, the chances of Big Men rivalries sparking violent conflagration increase. This leads to state fragmentation; that is, the shifting of relative power balance from the ruling Big Man toward the rivals. The strengthening of rival state-associated or non-state, societally powerful, Big Men local power centers, in turn, feeds the intensification and severity of power contestation between various Big Men constituencies, producing state fragmentation.

Hence, in the context of fragile authoritarian states, state fragmentation, viewed essentially as power shifts from the ruling Big Man toward his rivals, owes largely to the intensification of their power competition outside of the state's institutional framework. Thus, the politically, economically, and societally prominent Big Men contesting power in the context of an authoritarian and institutionally fragile state leads to instability and state fragmentation, but not necessarily to its failure, collapse, or disintegration. Here, the degree of fragmentation largely depends on the intensity and severity of the competition. State fragmentation in countries were power is narrowly concentrated is, therefore, a manifestation of intense Big Men power contestations, which largely take place beyond the state's formal institutions and include various levels of violence depending on their severity. In the particularly authoritarian states of the Horn of Africa, channels of peaceful power competition within the institutional framework of the state are few, which often results in the power competition between the Big Men and their most frequently identity-based constituencies turning violent.

In conditions of fragility, where the state has little capacity to control foreign relationships of non-state actors, the Big Men seek to

strengthen themselves in their domestic power competition through external partnerships. Due to their local power, and control of material and reputational assets, especially minerals or other natural resources, they attract foreign actors and strike pragmatic and transactional deals through which they obtain resources that strengthen them in their domestic power rivalries (Ylönen 2022a; 2023b). The Big Men's success in accumulating resources to engage in their domestic political battles leads to their intensification and accelerates state fragmentation. Their foreign partnerships also make them significant players in the international sphere due to their local power, which derives from their control of domestic resources, most notably minerals but also other tradable goods (both material and reputational) desired by external actors. Commensurate with their local power, the Big Men may constrain their foreign partners and become internationally significant players, as in the Horn of Africa (Ylönen 2023a; 2023b).

DYNAMICS OF STATE FRAGMENTATION IN THE HORN OF AFRICA: BIG MEN RIVALRIES AND LOCAL POWER

The Horn of Africa can be seen as a "bad neighborhood" (Reid 2014; Müller 2016) where the states' internal dynamics and violent conflicts cross borders, and governments have sought to influence the domestic affairs of their neighbors. All of the Horn of Africa's states and political entities, including its largest country, Ethiopia, have been modeled according to a Western-type political organization but are matched with variably authoritarian and exclusive Big Man governance. The colonial experiences, and imperial Ethiopia's expansion and domination (Zewde 2001), resulting in arbitrary borders and the imposition of coercive and hierarchical regimes, made Big Man-governed states significant players in shaping the political dynamics and societal order in the Horn of Africa. However, at the same time, states in the subregion came about as extractive political systems but with limited authority and legitimacy in their territorial peripheries. In the conditions of the fragile institutional structure of the authoritarian state, leaders have established strategies of politicization and instrumentalization of cultural identity markers in politics and governance to create and maintain divisions among societal groups in an effort to concentrate resources on themselves and their bases of support and to obtain and project power and control. These factors have guided the formational processes of contemporary states in the Horn and perpetuated their fragility.

In the Horn of Africa, authoritarian governance has since endured as the Big Man-led patron-client networks for accumulating resources

and personal power shape the political reality. Competition among these prominent individuals, and their groups and organizations, has featured capturing the national government and privatization of associated resources as the ultimate prize. While not all Big Men seek to capture the central government, and may instead want to dominate regional administrations or control certain strategic or resource-rich territories or business sectors, their overall goal is to gain political and economic power relative to their rivals. This has driven political divisions along Big Man rivalries and local centers of power drawing on the support of constituent identity groups. This relative weakening has perpetuated the inability of state institutions to manage political competition and mitigate violence.

The political dynamics of fragmentation of state power in the Horn of Africa is owed to exclusive Big Man governance and power contestation. These have often occurred in terms of patronage within the political and party structures of the state, as in Djibouti, Eritrea, and Ethiopia (where power has been less centralized), or outside of the state apparatus, especially among locally powerful Big Men and their organizations, as in the case of Somalia. By privatizing the state, the ruling individuals have used the official status of the government for private material and reputational benefit. They use the state, its foreign policy, and private enterprises, to generate resources to maintain power and the political status quo. Similarly, their non-state Big Man rivals utilize the resources they obtain through economic, social, and political ventures, and foreign partnerships, to compete for power. Both types of Big Men use assets in their control, both material and reputational, to strengthen themselves against domestic rivals (Ylönen 2023a, 189–90). When the state is fragile and incapable of imposing control over the private ventures of the Big Men, their autonomy enables them to engage in pragmatic and transactional relationships with foreign actors to acquire resources for their domestic battles without facing major state-imposed constraints. The Big Men use these partnerships to exchange assets they control for resources that benefit them in the domestic competition for power. By being seen as prominent in the domestic political context, these leading individuals and their organizations attract and exploit foreign actors in their national and local rivalries. In this way, the Big Men not only use their local prominence to draw external actors into domestic power contestations, but also maintain a varying degree of capacity to constrain their behavior.

In the Horn of Africa, political strife and conflicts have primarily domestic origins. This is because they emanate from the internal political dynamics of its states. External involvement may fuel instability and conflict in the Horn insofar as the ideational and material resources

provided by foreign actors gain traction and are used by the local players in their domestic rivalries. Foreign state and non-state actors involved in the domestic affairs of states in the Horn of Africa often have the intention to compete against each other for geopolitical or strategic influence but tend to face constraints from their local partners and adversaries. While such foreign actors get involved in the subregion with the intention of advancing their interests, domestically prominent Big Men, who act as centers of local power, seek to entice such external players to partner with them whenever such collaboration is perceived pragmatically beneficial (Bayart and Ellis 2000; Hagmann 2016). Much like the leading individuals of the governing elites who seek to use the official status of the state to obtain resources for advancing their personal power, locally dominant Big Men attempt to draw foreign attention and resources based on their societally prominent position and control of reputational and material assets. These assets include their societal influence, strategically located and economically attractive land, natural resources, human assets, such as labor, sections of the local population, or displaced people, and control of armed groups and militias. For both state-associated and societally powerful Big Men, success as contestants in the domestic "game" for power depends on their ability to accumulate, use, and redistribute resources in exchange for loyalty and support.

Moreover, the strength of politically significant societal forces, which also penetrate the state, owes largely to the influential Big Men and their ability to mobilize constituents and supporters. These individuals and their organizations, be they associated with governments or political opposition, often draw their support from societal groups in outlying areas where national governments have limited capacity to impose control. In such territories, mainly located in territorial, rural, peripheries of the state, locally influential leaders and their follower groups may be the main forces projecting power and social control. For example, in Somali federal states leading individuals of local governments and societal groupings linked to them are often the main political and economic players, while in rural Somalia Big Men-led clan militias and the violent Islamist extremist group al-Shabaab have been particularly prominent since the 1991 collapse of the central government. Similarly in Ethiopia, the ethnic federal system has fostered layers of political competition and enabled Big Men representing groupings organized largely around ethnic identity to contest and exercise power at the regional and national level. In both cases, the Big Men wield an important degree of local power among populations in their respective territories.

However, despite this reality, the mainstream international relations analysis continues to disregard local power and the agency of the

politically significant actors in the Horn of Africa. This is because by centering on states as unitary actors, it is not designed to appreciate the consequences of multiple agency emanating from state fragility and Big Man rivalries and political competition, resulting in variable degrees of fragmentation of state power that affects domestic power dynamics and actor behavior in the international sphere. In the Horn, both prominent state and societal players are significant in engrossing foreign partners and forging partnerships to obtain resources for their domestic power contestation. These relationships and associated foreign resources, including material and diplomatic support, help Big Men in their domestic rivalries and involve foreign actors in the states' internal politics. At the same time, however, their local power constrains foreign partners, and adversaries, and results in various degrees of local control in the domestic context. The foreign state and non-state engagement in the Horn of Africa therefore depends largely on the local agency and context that set the conditions and constraints for the involvement. Here the Big Men are in a powerful position to bargain with those external actors interested in being involved and advancing their interests within the Horn. This is because in most cases they, as prominent state-associated and societal actors, command strategic reputational and material assets, such as decision-making influence or control of strategically located land or other natural resources, which the external players seek to access. While such assets are considered valuable in foreign actors' strategic, security, and economic calculations, these players often have to conform to the conditions set by their local partners when seeking to advance their interests, as in the case of negotiating business deals, political agreements, or economic or humanitarian access.

Thus, instead of being passive targets of intervention or mere instruments of external powers, as depicted by the realist international relations discourse, the domestic actors in the Horn of Africa use foreign relationships and connections to advance their intra-state and subregional interests. The local power of these Big Men and their organizations, emerging from the control of reputational and material assets, gives them the capacity to constrain and orient the behavior of external partners in the domestic context. As a result, to effectively pursue their interest and attempt to achieve their set objectives, foreign actors involved in the Horn of Africa often adjust their strategies and practices according to conditions set by their local partners and the context. This international consequence that originates from the local power of Big Men not only gives them significant domestic and external influence but also demonstrates their agency and power in both domestic

and international affairs. For example, Big Man state actors in Eritrea and Djibouti, where power is highly centralized around the presidency, have much leverage in their affairs with external partners due to their domestic status and the countries' strategic location at the narrowest stretches of the Red Sea, where one the world's most important shipping lanes passes. Using this leverage, emanating largely from foreign security concerns and interest in lucrative logistics projects, the administrations of Presidents Isaias Afwerki and Ismaïl Omar Guelleh, in Eritrea and Djibouti, respectively, strike partnerships with foreign actors hosting military and intelligence facilities and establishing logistics hubs, which has generated rents and material and reputational resources (Pateman 1986; Oladipo 2015; "Israel Completes Construction" 2016; Gambrell 2021; Bezabeh 2023; Eichner 2023) and propelled competition among external powers. Both Big Man leaders have exercised their agency toward foreign partners by accepting, rejecting, canceling, and making new beneficial agreements, which is exemplified by the Djibouti government's expulsion of middle powers United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Saudi Arabia in 2015, the subsequent cancellations of port management and development contract with the UAE's Dubai Ports World (Ylönen 2021, 74–75; Styan 2022), and Eritrea's deepened ties with China and Russia (Meservey 2023). These partnerships have generated important resources for both leaders to maintain power, keep potential rivals at bay, and enforce the political status quo.

Similarly, patrons of the Ethiopian state have long used their leverage as desirable strategic and security partners for foreign actors in the turbulent Horn subregion. They have pursued a wide spectrum of foreign relations to attract external interest and resources for their domestic struggles. For example, Ethiopia partnered with the United States and then the Soviet Union during the Cold War, obtained vital military aid and operational support from various foreign partners during the recent Tigray conflict (Demissie 2023, 23–29), and cooperates with the United States mainly in counterterrorism while simultaneously maintaining an entrenched economic and development partnership with China. Despite periodic pressure from external powers, the Ethiopian government has exercised agency and leveraged its foreign relations. Recently, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed Ali's administration managed to dilute Western pressure on human rights violations during the Tigray war, swayed the United States to resume food aid, and canceled a stalled gas extraction and exportation contract with a Chinese company, ostensibly in favor of an American outfit (Human Rights Watch 2023; Dahir 2023; Esau 2022). This has been possible due to its local power and use of a wide-range of simultaneous external partnerships.

In the same vein, the prominent societal status of not government-aligned Big Men in the Horn of Africa gives them the ability to project influence and accumulate resources. They control reputational, human, and material assets that they use in their power competition against their state and non-state rivals. As part of their power contestation, these Big Men engage in pragmatic and transactional external partnerships that generate resources for their domestic rivalries. Depending on their interests in the evolving power competition, their alignment and association may also shift between the opposition and the state, and in both they may assume leading roles. In Ethiopia, for example, societally powerful and internationally connected Big Men, possessing a variable capacity of concentrating and administering resources and a degree of coercive force, head their ethno-nationalist identity-based social groupings. Parts of these groups are organized into ethnically defined forces wielding different extents of coercive power and able to exert influence on people and territory in remote parts of each state. Most notably in Ethiopia, Big Man power bases have included regional military forces (e.g., Afar, Amhara, Oromo, and Tigray) and non-state armed groups (e.g., Fano militia and Oromo Liberation Army "Shene"), but these are not solely limited to armed organizations. Some such Big Men include Tigrayan leaders Debretsion Gebremichael and Getachew Reda, the Oromo Liberation Army commander Kumsa Diriba, the Amhara ethno-nationalist Fano militia leaders Mihret Wodajo and Fantahun Muhabaw, and opposition figures such as Berhanu Nega, Eskinder Nega, and Jawar Mohammed.

Social prominence owing to religious and cultural assets, economic and business ventures, command of coercive force, and redistribution of resources along patron-client relationships, also leverages Big Men and contributes to their political power. This is even more evident in Somalia, where the collapse of the central authority in 1991 created conditions in which societally prominent Big Men supplanted the state as the main security providers and increased their role as economic agents (Hagmann 2016). In the absence of central government constraints, these Big Men, due to their societally significant roles as clan sultans and elders, religious leaders and protectors, and/or businessmen, and often linked to local or regional administrations, are dominant in the domestic political and economic scene, command militias and private defense groups, and maintain international partnerships and linkages. They draw their influence from the control of reputational (e.g., religious and cultural legitimacy) and material (e.g., financial and major entrepreneurial) assets. These figures include prominent politicians, Sharif Sheikh Ahmed, Omar Sharmarke, Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed "Farmaajo,"

and Abdirahman Abdishakur Warsame; politicians/Islamist leaders, including Ahmed Moalim Fiqi Ahmed Mohamed Islaam Madobe; business leaders such as Ahmed Duale Gelle "Haaf," Abdirashid Duale, and the violent Salafist Islamist group al-Shabab financier Ahmed Nur Jim'ale; and clan leaders, such as Garad Jama Garad Ali (Dhulbahante), Sultan Dhawal (Dir), and Boqor Burhan Boqor Muse (Darod). The most prominent of such Big Men are active among the extensive Somali diaspora in the Persian Gulf, the Middle East, and around the world, which has allowed further expansion of their social, financial, political, and material networks. With the establishment of the Islamic Courts Union in 2000, political Islam, including groupings professing Salafist ideological orientation, gained ground and boosted the societal status and prominence of religious and Islamist leaders in the governance and administration of justice.

Although the American-backed Ethiopian intervention in 2006–7 stripped the Islamists of their paramount political status, the influence of Islamist Big Men and Salafist groupings remained as they organized opposition to the secular Transitional Federal Government (Marchal and Sheikh 2015, 137–38). Similarly, the Big Men leaders in Somali federal states have maintained significant autonomy in their respective regions, such as Ahmed Mohamed Islaam in Jubaland and Said Abdullahi Deni and his predecessors in Puntland, and privatized external support for their power competition at the local and national level (United Nations 2012; Cannon 2019; "Somali Troops" 2021; European Union 2022; Khalif 2023). Such Big Men are able to present themselves as dominant due to their control of domestic assets (i.e., local power) and attract foreign partners who seek influence in Somalia. Despite the ongoing state-building efforts that aim to reinstate federal government authority, the Big Men continue to project local power and exercise relative autonomy. They engage in national and local level rivalries of political and economic prominence in which they use the control of local material and reputational assets to maintain autonomous, pragmatic, and transactional relations with foreign partners. Through these relationships, the Big Men exchange their local assets for material and reputational resources that strengthen them in their domestic battles.

Finally, due to the local power of the Big Men state and non-state actors in the Horn of Africa, foreign partners and opponents often face pressure to adjust their approaches according to their exigencies, which constrains and orients external actor behavior. The Horn governments' shifting pragmatic and transactional foreign policy orientations and alignments, and the various prominent societal Big Man actors' foreign partnerships, often force foreign powers and non-state actors to

adjust and reorient their policies toward the Horn of Africa. For example, during the Mohamed Abdullahi "Farmaajo" presidency (2017–22), Somalia took a turn away from the middle power partners UAE and Saudi Arabia in favor of Qatar and Turkey, while the subsequent Hassan Sheikh Mohamud administration (2022–) has mended ties with Abu Dhabi and Riyadh. Farmaajo's policy led the Big Man administrations in Somaliland, Puntland, and Jubaland to strengthen autonomous ties with the UAE, in particular, but Mohamud's pragmatic reconciliatory approach again initially improved Mogadishu's relationship with Somali federal units and Somaliland. Meanwhile, the Big Men leaders of Somali federal states (mainly Puntland and Jubaland), Somaliland, and various opposition forces, notably al-Shabaab, have continued to pursue autonomous external affairs and established partnerships with foreign state and non-state actors, which they use for political and economic support in their confrontation with the Somali central government. Similarly in Ethiopia, the pragmatic approach of the Big Men, using its local power to pursue a wide spectrum of foreign partners, provides incentives and constraints to external actors. In the end, depending on the level of their local power, derived from the ability to control reputational and material assets, these Big Men have a variable level of capacity to constrain the behavior of external state and non-state actors. The implication of this is that the domestic political dynamics and actions of prominent state and societal actors in the Horn of Africa affect the behavior of foreign actors and are therefore internationally significant.

CONCLUSION

Generally, contemporary states in Africa emerged from colonial polities aimed at imperialist extraction. Governed by narrow elites of administrators, politics in these entities were characterized by exclusion, subjugation, and violence. Upon decolonization, the previously established practices of governance by division, based on politicization and instrumentalization of cultural identity, enabled ruling Big Men to use exclusionary politics to gain, maintain, and project power. This, in turn, favored the perpetuation of exclusive, authoritarian, rule, and the Big Man privatization of the state. Through the legacy of colonialism, imperialist domination, violent extraction, and institutional fragility, authoritarianism informal channels of governance and resource distribution became prevalent, leading to power competition among Big Men largely outside of the state's formal institutional structures. At times, governing Big Men were challenged to the extent that their rivals gained relative influence, leading to the fragmentation of state power and shifting

balance toward the non-ruling Big Men and their constituencies along identity-based societal group markers.

In the largely authoritarian states of the Horn of Africa, the ruling Big Man individuals and elites' strength and capacity are limited, albeit variably, and governments' presence and influence in much of the countries' outlying territories is minimal. The institutional fragility of the states, perpetuated by the ruling Big Man's preference for informal channels of exercising state authority and accumulating and distributing resources, has led to their privatization by these patrons of the state. At the same time, however, withdrawing resources from the state has driven their decreasing capacity to concentrate power and withstand challenges to the change of status quo by rival Big Men. The inability to exert control and prevent the strengthening of competing Big Men power centers, including through the monopolization of foreign relations, leads to the intensification of political competition, fragmentation of state power, and the patrons of the state being reduced to players competing for power among several societally prominent Big Men. As a result, political and related economic power are highly contested and, because the state's institutional framework is unable to mitigate coercive manifestations of such competition, political rivalries are often characterized by various degrees of violence but do not necessarily lead to state failure, collapse, or disintegration. Leading Big Man individuals associated with the government, able to use the state's assets and resources in the political competition, are best placed to contest power at the national level, but due to the lack of state capacity, their strength is less in outlying areas where their societally prominent Big Man rivals may dominate. Yet, there is variance in the Horn of Africa regarding the strength of the ruling Big Men. In the Horn's small states, Djibouti and Eritrea, the governing Big Men have managed to use state resources to maintain power and prevent the rise of rivals, while in its large states, Ethiopia and Somalia, the fragmentation of state power has been more prevalent and led to the strengthening of competing Big Man local power centers. Still, both state-associated and non-state Big Men use their societal status to project power by accumulating, controlling, and redistributing material and reputational resources, which enables them to exert influence and gain leverage over political rivals.

In the Horn of Africa, political contestation between Big Men often manifests itself through their cultural, ethnic, or clan identity-based followers and constituencies. In essence, the Big Men form power centers that concentrate resources in clientelist networks and use them to project influence and strengthen their position in the domestic power competition. While the ruling Big Men use the official status of the state

to privatize and appropriate public resources from domestic and foreign sources, governments' inability to exert control over external linkages of competing Big Men allows these societally prominent, and often ruling elite-linked, individuals and their groups to maintain their own foreign connections. Here local power, a two-directional relationship between societal/political prominence and the command of material and intangible assets/resources, enables the Big Men to attract foreign partners and engage in pragmatic and transactional relations with them, which empowers these prominent state and societal actors and permits them to impose constraints on domestic rivals and external players. The more local power they gain, the more capable they are of projecting control and constraining other actors. This gives the Big Men leverage over their domestic rivals and foreign actors and contributes to a strong bargaining position with potential partners. While the within-the-state power competition encourages Big Men to present themselves as attractive strategic partners and invite external actors to side with them against domestic rivals, local power that enables them to constrain external partners and adversaries gives them influence to regulate the level of foreign involvement. Thus, through the pragmatic and transactional approach, the Big Men influence and guide the behavior of their external partners and adversaries. This results in their significant international agency.

However, meanwhile, the mainstream realist international relations discourse has continued to depict the Horn of Africa as a passive target of outside influence and intervention. Based on the realist depiction of the state as a unitary actor, and associated with heavily state-centric strategic and security approaches, it is ill-equipped to analyze states' internal political dynamics, such as Big Men political contestations, agency of state and societal actors, state fragmentation, and local power, which give rise to multiple-agency in international affairs due to prominent domestic players engaging in largely autonomous foreign relationships. By ignoring the role of domestic non-state actors, it fails to recognize how they project local power in external affairs, constraining and forcing change in the behavior of foreign partners and opponents. This is particularly evident in the Horn of Africa where the local power of the Big Men and its international consequences emerge as an important concept in understanding state-society relations and the subregion's external affairs.

Finally, Big Man state and societal players in the Horn of Africa accumulate and project local power not only in their domestic rivalries but also use it in their relations with external state and non-state actors. Their agency in these relationships is based on local power and their ability to make themselves attractive partners and engage interested

external players in partnerships. Local power enables the Big Men to have significant leverage in their pragmatic and transactional foreign relationships allowing them to generate resources in exchange for providing local material or reputational assets. The resources Big Men and their organizations acquire from abroad leverage their position in domestic power rivalries and strengthen them toward their foreign partners. Consequently, Big Men and local power are crucial concepts to help understand the political dynamics and their international consequences in the Horn of Africa. Meanwhile, the lack of consideration of domestic realities, particularly the dynamics of fragmentation of state power and multiple agency in states' external relations, remains a persisting challenge in the mainstream realist international relations analysis.

NOTES

1. The term "Big Man" refers to the leading figure wielding political and/or economic power in a state. He (in most cases a man) draws on his position, official status, and affiliation with the state to control and mobilize economic and political assets and resources and maintain power. The "Big Men," on the other hand, are a group of socially, culturally, economically, and/or politically prominent and influential individuals who compete for power. They are often locally powerful and either cooperate and collude with or challenge the leading Big Man for state power.

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