

INTERNET ARCHIVE  
WayBackMachine  
66 captures  
25 Dec 99 - 4 Sep 08

http://www.theatlantic.com/election/connection/foreign/anarchy.htm

Go

MAY SEP OCT Close

2005 4 2008 2009 Help

THE Atlantic.com

THE MAGAZINE

ARCHIVE

VOICES

THE CURRENT

ELECTION '08

MULTIMEDIA

SUBS

FEBRUARY 1994 ATLANTIC

How scarcity, crime, overpopulation, tribalism, and disease are rapidly destroying the social fabric of our planet

BY ROBERT D. KAPLAN

## The Coming Anarchy

The Minister's eyes were like egg yolks, an aftereffect of some of the many illnesses, malaria especially, endemic in his country. There was also an irrefutable sadness in his eyes. He spoke in a slow and creaking voice, the voice of hope about to expire. Flame trees, coconut palms, and a ballpoint-blue Atlantic composed the background. None of it seemed beautiful, though. "In forty-five years I have never seen things so bad. We did not manage ourselves well after the British departed. But what we have now is something worse—the revenge of the poor, of the social failures, of the people least able to bring up children in a modern society." Then he referred to the recent coup in the West African country Sierra Leone. "The boys who took power in Sierra Leone come from houses like this." The Minister jabbed his finger at a corrugated metal shack teeming with children. "In three months these boys confiscated all the official Mercedes, Volvos, and BMWs and willfully wrecked them on the road." The Minister mentioned one of the coup's leaders, Solomon Anthony Joseph Musa, who shot the people who had paid for his schooling, "in order to erase the humiliation and mitigate the power his middle-class sponsors held over him."

Tyranny is nothing new in Sierra Leone or in the rest of West Africa. But it is now part and parcel of an increasing lawlessness that is far more significant than any coup, rebel incursion, or episodic experiment in democracy. Crime was what my friend—a top-ranking African official whose life would be threatened were I to identify him more precisely—really wanted to talk about. Crime is what makes West Africa a natural point of departure for my report on what the political character of our planet is likely to be in the twenty-first century.

The cities of West Africa at night are some of the unsafest places in the world. Streets are unlit; the police often lack gasoline for their vehicles; armed burglars, carjackers, and muggers proliferate. "The government in Sierra Leone has no writ after dark," says a foreign resident, shrugging. When I was in the capital, Freetown, last September, eight men armed with AK-47s broke into the house of an American man. They tied him up and stole everything of value.

ARTICLE TOOLS

 E-MAIL ARTICLE

 PRINTER FORMAT

SE

MORE FROM '

More on F

ALS

ROBERT

SEPTEMBER 2008

### Lifting the Bamboo Cu

As China and India vie for power a strategic battleground. Four Ar fractured, resource-rich country what the U.S. should do to shap

AUGUST 1, 2008

### Behind the Indian Em

"You would think that the Bush a the Karzai government not to ar cozying up to India."

JULY/AUGUST 2008

### What Rumsfeld Got Ri

How Donald Rumsfeld remade th uncertain world [Web only: [Video Agent](#)"]

NAME

ADDRESS 1

ADDRESS 2

CITY

STATE ZIP

SUBMIT

EMAIL

INTERNET ARCHIVE

Wayback Machine

 direct flights bet  
 66 captures  
 25 Dec 09 - 4 Sep 08

Go

 MAY SEP OCT Close  
 4  
 2005 2008 2009 Help  
 ATLAN T  
 v Applivan

of Transportation because of ineffective security at the terminal and its environs. A State Department report cited the airport for "extortion by law-enforcement and immigration officials." This is one of the few times that the U.S. government has embargoed a foreign airport for reasons that are linked purely to crime. In Abidjan, effectively the capital of the Cote d'Ivoire, or Ivory Coast, restaurants have stick- and gun-wielding guards who walk you the fifteen feet or so between your car and the entrance, giving you an eerie taste of what American cities might be like in the future. An Italian ambassador was killed by gunfire when robbers invaded an Abidjan restaurant. The family of the Nigerian ambassador was tied up and robbed at gunpoint in the ambassador's residence. After university students in the Ivory Coast caught bandits who had been plaguing their dorms, they executed them by hanging tires around their necks and setting the tires on fire. In one instance Ivorian policemen stood by and watched the "necklacings," afraid to intervene. Each time I went to the Abidjan bus terminal, groups of young men with restless, scanning eyes surrounded my taxi, putting their hands all over the windows, demanding "tips" for carrying my luggage even though I had only a rucksack. In cities in six West African countries I saw similar young men everywhere—hordes of them. They were like loose molecules in a very unstable social fluid, a fluid that was clearly on the verge of igniting.

"You see," my friend the Minister told me, "in the villages of Africa it is perfectly natural to feed at any table and lodge in any hut. But in the cities this communal existence no longer holds. You must pay for lodging and be invited for food. When young men find out that their relations cannot put them up, they become lost. They join other migrants and slip gradually into the criminal process."

"In the poor quarters of Arab North Africa," he continued, "there is much less crime, because Islam provides a social anchor: of education and indoctrination. Here in West Africa we have a lot of superficial Islam and superficial Christianity. Western religion is undermined by animist beliefs not suitable to a moral society, because they are based on irrational spirit power. Here spirits are used to wreak vengeance by one person against another, or one group against another." Many of the atrocities in the Liberian civil war have been tied to belief in juju spirits, and the BBC has reported, in its magazine Focus on Africa, that in the civil fighting in adjacent Sierra Leone, rebels were said to have "a young woman with them who would go to the front naked, always walking backwards and looking in a mirror to see where she was going. This made her invisible, so that she could cross to the army's positions and there bury charms . . . to improve the rebels' chances of success."

Finally my friend the Minister mentioned polygamy. Designed for a pastoral way of life, polygamy continues to thrive in sub-Saharan Africa even though it is increasingly uncommon in Arab North Africa. Most youths I met on the road in West Africa told me that they were from "extended" families, with a mother in one place and a father in another. Translated to an urban environment, loose family structures are largely responsible for the world's highest birth

 Gaffe Of The Night [READ MORE](#)

05 September 2008 12:05 A.M.

## Ross Douthat

 John The Fighter [READ MORE](#)

04 September 2008 10:43 P.M.

## Megan McArdle

 McCain's acceptance speech [RE](#)

04 September 2008 10:32 P.M.

## Marc Ambinder

 Live Twittering [READ MORE](#)

04 September 2008 8:00 P.M.

## Ta-nehisi Coates

 Michelle Obama--"uppyity" [READ](#)

04 September 2008 4:21 P.M.

## James Fallows

He whose name must not be utt

05 September 2008 12:05 A.M.

## Jeffrey Goldberg

 Explaining Michael Chabon's Spar [READ MORE](#)

04 September 2008 11:12 A.M.

## Clive Crook

 Sarah Palin's speech [READ MOR](#)

04 September 2008 12:22 A.M.

INTERNET ARCHIVE   MAY SEP OCT [Close](#)  
**Wayback Machine** BETA [66 captures](#) 25 Dec 99 - 4 Sep 08 2005 **4** 2008 2009 [Help](#)

explosion of the H  
 animism, they provide a weak S  
 against the d  
 osive social effects of the in  
 gles, in those

cities African culture is being redefined while desertification and deforestation—also tied to overpopulation—drive more and more African peasants out of the countryside.

PAGES: [1](#) [2](#) [3](#) [4](#) [5](#) [6](#) [7](#) [8](#) [NEXT>](#)

ARTICLE TOOLS	<a href="#">E-MAIL ARTICLE</a>	<a href="#">Digg</a>	<a href="#">reddit</a>
	<a href="#">PRINTER FORMAT</a>	<a href="#">delicious</a>	<a href="#">What's this?</a>

What do you think? Discuss this article in [Post & Riposte](#).

[Subscribe to our e-mail newsletter.](#)