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Child-Soldiers, Large Shadows: The Cycle of Cruelty in Kourouma's *West Africa*

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Abstract

This study examines the harrowing intersection of the cycle of cruelty and the large shadows of child-soldiering in Ahmadou Kourouma's seminal work, *Allah n'est pas obligé*. Set against the backdrop of the brutal civil wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone, the chronicle follows Birahima, a child soldier who navigates a landscape defined by the total collapse of traditional moral and familial structures. The research explores how the protagonist and his peers transition from victims of war to perpetrators of extreme violence. It argues that this cruelty is not an inherent trait but a survival mechanism fueled by the indoctrination of warlords and the desensitization caused by constant exposure to atrocities. In the fictional universe of Kourouma, the figure of the child soldier functions not as an aberration of nature but as a symptomatic product of political and moral collapse. The apparent "cruelty" of the child is neither innate nor psychologically autonomous; rather, it is a refracted manifestation of a failed adult order structured by corruption, civil war, and postcolonial disillusionment. By dismantling the sentimental construction of childhood as an inviolable realm of innocence, Kourouma exposes what may be termed the ontological dispossession of an entire generation. In *Allah n'est pas obligé*, the child narrator's fragmented syntax, dark humor, and oscillation between naivety and brutality dramatize a subjectivity forged in violence. The narrative voice resists stable moral categorization, thereby destabilizing binary oppositions between victim and perpetrator. The child soldier emerges as a hybrid figure – at once minor and executioner – whose lethal agency coexists with profound vulnerability. This paradox compels the reader into an ethically uncomfortable terrain where responsibility is displaced upward, toward the political structures and adult actors who orchestrate the conditions of war. Kourouma's aesthetic strategy thus operates as an indictment: the tragedy resides less in corrupted childhood than in corrupted adulthood. In revealing how warfare annihilates not only lives but the very possibility of childhood itself, Kourouma reframes the child soldier as the living testimony of a society that has forfeited its moral legitimacy and, with it, its future.

Keywords: Cruelty, Child-soldiering, Socio-political disintegration, Kourouma

Introduction

The African Francophone novel is derived from French-language African literature. It is a genre created by the contact between the African oral tradition, the French language, and literature. According to Mortimer (1990:1), "the francophone African novel, like its Anglophone counterpart, came into being because of dramatic political, social, and cultural transformations on the African continent; it is a product of colonialism."

In the formative years of the African Francophone novel, the use of local languages was forbidden. The infiltration of local or slang languages into French was rejected, while absolute conformity to the linguistic code was praised. Camara Laye was well known to have reached a degree of perfection in this regard; his work *The Black Child* has received awards all over the world. However, Pageard (1997:65) lamented that "the style suffers from



slangy and vulgar expressions. These are all the more shocking because they are sometimes used to translate the words of Africans who have had no contact with Europeans." Pageard's argument was based on the fact that the African novel had Europeans as its audience, Africans being illiterate. Francophone African writers who conformed to Pageard's standard were accepted not because their works were perfect, but because they proved to be good propagators of French, a colonial language. Cheikh Hamidou Kane expressed pride in his linguistic assimilation when, as recorded in Gauvin (1978:151), he noted: "Several French intellectuals wrote to me or came to see me about the *Ambiguous Adventure*: I had the feeling that I had communicated, in the depths of communication, beyond cultural differences."

Fortunately, today, French-speaking African writers no longer emphasize conformity to the linguistic rules stipulated by Europeans to satisfy their colonial masters; rather, they write to reveal the socioeconomic, political, cultural, religious, and linguistic realities of the black race. Criticism, according to Zabou (1991:10), is now directed against African writers who continue to express themselves in European languages without mixing in their art of orality. Today we hear neologisms such as Fran-Kongo, Fran-Malinké, Fran-Yoruba, and so on. Of all the classic writers mentioned above, our Ivorian writer Ahmadou Kourouma stands out for this Frenchness, the path followed by many young African writers of French expression.

Mortimer (1990:112) describes Kourouma as a "filmmaker" of his people, one who stimulates the "filming" and recording of sights and sounds in the city and in the countryside. Boka (1991:124-137) establishes the relationship between literature and history in order to convince his readers that literature is conditioned by reality: as the expression of human life, literature must be the reflection of history. Gassama (1995), in his article "The Language of Ahmadou Kourouma or French under the African Sun," meditates on the social function of French-speaking Negro-African literature. Using *Les soleils des indépendances* as a basic work and common thread for his reflection, Gassama (1995:8) points out that the African literature produced by Kourouma is "a conservatory of meaning, a fresh source in the desert of political mistakes, a place of memory and hope in the disasters that devastate African societies, a refuge of dignity." Considering his many arrests and exiles, many readers consider Kourouma to be a revolutionary; yet these exiles and arrests never deterred him from continuing to fight for freedom and national identity. King (1999) observes that Kourouma's novels are satires on modern African states ruled by single parties and vain, lecherous, violent leaders, and on the relationship of African society to despotic colonial governments and then to the self-serving schemes of contemporary Europe.

Laditan (2001:233-242) emphasizes that *Allah n'est pas obligé* recounts the details of the Liberian war, seeing the novel as a historical document that can validly replace any history book on the war; he adds that this work is a historical novel of massacres, carnage, and murders, in which innocent children are the sad heroes. Borgomano (2000:25) notes that Kourouma displays a satirical streak regarding the post-independence era: the narrator Birahima recounts how, for lack of schooling, he became a street child and later a child soldier, observing that "even with a university degree, you're not qualified to be a nurse or a teacher in one of the banana republics of Francophone Africa" (*Allah n'est pas obligé*, pp. 9-10).

Thematic Statement

In *Allah n'est pas obligé*, Ahmadou Kourouma subverts the traditional "coming-of-age" narrative by depicting the psychological erosion of the child-protagonist, Birahima. This article contends that Kourouma uses the dual forces of bereavement (the loss of the maternal/ancestral anchor) and systemic cruelty (the life of a child soldier) to illustrate the "postcolonial nightmare" – a state where the child is no longer a symbol of the future, but a traumatized tool of a decaying political present. Central to the juvenile experience in the novel is the loss of the "mother figure" and the subsequent "orphan status." This bereavement acts as the catalyst for Birahima's journey, leaving him psychologically untethered and vulnerable to recruitment into small soldier units. The study highlights Kourouma's use of a "broken" French (interspersed with Malinké expressions and dictionary definitions) to mirror the fractured innocence and raw trauma of the juvenile narrator. In Kourouma's universe, the "cruelty" of the child is a direct reflection of a failed adult world. By stripping away the romanticized notion of childhood, Kourouma forces the reader to confront the bereavement of an entire generation – not just of their parents, but of their humanity and future. The child soldier is a hybrid being: a tragic confluence of the innocence of a minor and the lethal agency of a killer.

Theoretical Framework: The Sociocriticism of Pierre Zima

Pierre Zima (1985) places literary criticism in a reflexive approach concerning its problematics and speculative tools, highlighting the philosophical presuppositions present in the theories of European and North American literary criticism. An enlightening dialogue is established between philosophical questions and the issues of the social sciences: the different theories of literature must be situated on the level of philosophical debates to be clearly understood. Understanding critical currents requires a reflection on their philosophical and historical genesis. Zima reconstructs the philosophical and aesthetic foundations of literary criticism, which are articulated around the contradictory aesthetic postulates of Kant and Hegel; Kantian and Hegelian aesthetics are in fact more or less implicitly at the center of the critical controversies of the twentieth century.

Zima deals with critical systems that are impossible to identify with a particular philosophical aesthetic, such as semiotics. A.J. Greimas (1966) explores a conceptual and rationalist approach, insisting on the totalizing and unitary character of the literary universe: the semiotic analysis of deep structures underlying texts reveals their semantic and narrative foundations. This semiotics of Hegelian and Cartesian influence tends to erase the particularity of literary texts. U. Eco and R. Barthes (1981) also interest themselves in the open nature of texts; Eco's theory oscillates between the Kantian and Hegelian poles – between the Kantian discourse of ambiguity and open structure, and the Hegelian discourse of the limitation of meaning and interpretation.

Zima's sociocritical theory is a framework of literary and cultural analysis that examines the relationship between literature, society, and ideology. Rooted in Marxist and structuralist traditions, Zima's approach emphasizes the role of social structures and ideologies in the formation of literary texts, as well as how literature reflects and critiques societal dynamics. Literature is not created in isolation but is deeply influenced by its social context; texts are shaped by the cultural, political, and economic conditions of their time. A

literary text is part of a larger network of discourses in society, and sociocriticism studies the way literature dialogues with these discourses—either by reinforcing dominant ideologies or by resisting them. Zima's theory is particularly interested in the discovery of ideologies hidden in texts, identifying how literature reproduces or criticizes ideological constructions such as capitalism, colonialism, or patriarchy. Although rooted in social criticism, Zima also recognizes the importance of formal analysis: narrative structure, language, and style are examined to discover their role in articulating social meanings. Sociocriticism is not a one-sided analysis of how society influences literature, but also of how literature, in turn, influences and shapes ideologies and social values.

Zima's sociocritical theory is particularly useful for analyzing texts that address social issues in depth, such as postcolonial literature. Applied to *Allah n'est pas obligé*, it reveals how the text criticizes the socio-political legacies of colonialism and the exploitation of vulnerable populations, and how the novel's language and narrative structure themselves perform this critique.

Analytical Pillars

Allah n'est pas obligé (2000) presents contemporary Africa in the face of civil war. The novel is divided into six parts, each introduced by Birahima, the protagonist who recounts his personal experiences in Côte d'Ivoire, Liberia, and Sierra Leone. The story is told in the first person, and remarkable throughout is the quality of the language used by the street child and little soldier, which reflects his social status; there is also the case where he uses "big words" thanks to the dictionaries at his disposal.

The protagonist begins his story by giving six reasons why it is going to take a bizarre turn. He flashes back to his childhood but is unable to specify his age due to conflicting information from his mother and grandmother. He then turns to his mother's story: as a young girl she was so beautiful that she nearly died during FGM, a cultural ceremony in which the female genitalia are cut, but the cutter saved her life. This good circumciser wanted Birahima's mother to marry her son, a hunter and sorcerer who is not Muslim, which is strange among the Malinké. The village rejected the proposal, and Birahima's mother was quickly given to his father as wife instead. When she became pregnant, she noticed a black spot on her right leg that later became an incurable ulcer, preventing her from walking well and bringing great pain. When his father died, following Malinké tradition, his mother was inherited by his uncle Bala, an upright but fetish-practicing man; despite opposition, Birahima's mother found Bala the kindest of his uncles. When his mother died, Birahima was entrusted, according to Malinké customs, to an aunt who lived in Liberia with her husband. He set out to find her but failed, for his aunt died before he found her.

The search for his aunt in Liberia, with the help of Yacouba, brings them to a war zone where Birahima participates alongside the four "bandits": Doe, Taylor, Johnson, and El Hadj Koroma. He exposes the atrocities not only in Liberia but also in Sierra Leone, where the conflict pits the democrat Kabbah against the bandits Foday Sankoh and Johnny Koroma. Finally reunited with his aunt, he finds she has just died; he returns home to his cousin, now a doctor, who asks Birahima to tell his story.

Death as the Catalyst for Displacement

Birahima's journey begins with the death of his mother. In African literature, the mother often symbolizes the Motherland or tradition; her death represents the final severance from a stable, moral world. The description of his mother's ulcerous leg is a metaphor for a decaying society. Her death leaves Birahima "un-moored," forcing him into a "picaresque" journey across borders into Liberia and Sierra Leone – an ontological dislocation, the loss of one's sense of being and place.

The Language of Cruelty: The "Glossaries"

Birahima carries four dictionaries (Larousse, Petit Robert, and others) to explain the "big words" of war. This is Kourouma's most brilliant device: by having a child define words like "tribalism," "guerrilla," and "genocide," Kourouma highlights the absurdity of adult cruelty. The dictionaries are Birahima's only shield against a reality that makes no sense – a linguistic subversion, or irony, that exposes the emptiness of the categories adults use to justify slaughter.

The Dehumanization of the Child-Soldier

The child is not just a witness to cruelty; he becomes an agent of it. Birahima smokes hashish and carries an AK-47. Kourouma shows that in a world "not obliged" to be fair, the child must adopt cruelty to survive. He uses "nouchi" (street slang) and influences his French with this argot to tell horrific stories with a shrug; this "casual cruelty" reflects how bereavement has numbed the child to his own suffering.

Causes of Child Cruelty and Death: The Critique of Two Ideologies

In *Allah n'est pas obligé*, two ideologies are clearly subject to criticism by narrative bodies. On the one hand, the liberal and economic policies pursued in the hero's country, Côte d'Ivoire, whose contrasting results fall far short of hoped-for expectations; on the other, ethnic nationalism, a discourse that justifies the political and economic hegemony of one ethnic community over the country, and whose application leads in the fictional universe to the terrible civil wars of Liberia and Sierra Leone. The legitimacy of both dominant ideologies is reassessed through the critical judgment of the young narrator Birahima.

Globalization and Economic Liberalism

Kourouma's novel is part of a geopolitics of globalization that began with the slave trade, continued with colonization, and has experienced a new and intense dimension at the beginning of this century. With *Allah n'est pas obligé*, the Ivorian writer stages globalization in its most sordid and abject aspects. The questioning of economic and political liberalism extends the criticism begun with *En attendant le vote des bêtes sauvages* (*Waiting for the Vote of the Wild Beasts*), whose final chapters described the drastic measures advocated by the international financial institutions (the IMF) to the Gulf Republic to save that country from economic bankruptcy. These reforms led to mass layoffs, company closures, and

downsizing, putting vital sectors such as education and health at risk. In *Allah n'est pas obligé*, we find the consequences of these reforms on the African social fabric.

From the outset, the young narrator's account emphasizes the failure of the school and its role as a "social elevator":

My school didn't get very far; I cut elementary two. I left the bench because everyone said school was worthless, not even an old grandmother's fart. (...) because even with a university degree, you don't get a damn about being a nurse or a teacher in one of the corrupt banana republics of French-speaking Africa. (...) you don't get a damn about making easy money as a state agent in a screwed-up and corrupt republic like Guinea, Ivory Coast, etc., etc. (pp. 9–10)

The narrator justifies his low level of education by the decay of school structures in a "screwed-up and corrupt republic," but also because school and a diploma no longer guarantee employment, as the state is unable to absorb the overflow of graduates leaving universities in Côte d'Ivoire and neighbouring countries. In the context of the crisis of the 1990s on which the story is based, the fragility of African states is rendered by the collapse of key sectors such as education and health (the hero's mother dies of an infection poorly treated because of a lack of financial resources) and the unemployment of a qualified and uprooted youth. The novel opens with this picture of crisis—that of Côte d'Ivoire in the 1990s. The situation of Birahima is typical of what is generally called in sub-Saharan Africa the "conjuncturés": victims of the economic situation and crisis. Côte d'Ivoire, long cited as a model of economic development, is collapsing, leaving behind an unemployed youth and a society given over to corruption, "resourcefulness," and "business."

Two Forms of Globalized Violence

In Birahima's descriptions of the conflicts in Liberia and Sierra Leone, one observation emerges: certain forms of globalization lie at the origin of the national crises and civil wars that devour African children. The first is the Atlantic slave trade and its consequences, which weakened the political and economic structures of Africa. The resulting abolitionist process installed black American "elites"—freed slaves—at the head of Liberia and Sierra Leone. These new masters jeopardized the future of these territories by instituting segregationist systems against the "natives," giving rise to tribal and ethnic tensions:

The natives are the black African negroes who are indigenous to the country. They are to be distinguished from black African-American Negroes, the descendants of freed slaves. These descendants of slaves, also known as Congos, behaved as settlers in Liberian society. (...) It was for this reason that the natives revolted (...) and mounted a conspiracy against the colonialist and arrogant African-Americans. (pp. 103–104)

With a certain irony, Kourouma points out a striking paradox in African history: the project to create Liberia, based on laudable humanitarian intentions, produced a highly unequal and fragile society and a very precarious national cohesion. (From its inception until the 1980 coup, the country was ruled by descendants of African-American slaves.) Sierra Leone's case mirrors Liberia's, since it was also enslaved by the "Creoles," descendants of African-American slaves, for more than a century before experiencing chronic political

instability – a "mess squared" – after independence. In this sense, the text is a critique of triangular trade and its impact on African political structures.

The other form of globalization is liberal capitalism, which is bringing the economies of young African states to their knees. The development of corruption among those who are supposed to embody authority (magistrates, customs officers, policemen) signals the erosion of the state, just as the appearance of a class of businessmen of all kinds (illustrated by Yacouba) signals its disorganization and the growing impoverishment of social strata already weakened by years of dictatorship. It is in this context of a weakening state that a "war economy" emerges in Liberia and Sierra Leone. Taking advantage of the economic and political crises, military leaders organized looting, the sale of consumer items at the lowest prices, and, above all, exploited natural resources such as diamonds and rubber for their own profit – a "mafia" economy that enriches only the strongest, leaving a few crumbs to the child soldiers, cannon fodder for conflicts whose real stakes they barely measure. This is the drama the novel emphasizes: the scoundrel exploitation of children thrown into wars, the logic of which is often economic. This leads Kourouma to say, via his narrator, that "the soldier-child is the most famous character of the end of the twentieth century."

Kourouma reminds us here, with humour and brutality, that the "power to kill" is no longer the prerogative of the "dictator-presidents" of the "corrupt banana republics"; it sadly also belongs "to those who no longer have anything to do on earth and in the heaven of Allah" (pp. 120–121). Birahima's journey through Liberia and Sierra Leone is littered with figures of wandering children whose family destinies have been shattered by the economic crisis and war:

When you have no one left on earth, neither father, nor mother, nor brother nor sister, and you are a little one, a little cute in a screwed-up and barbaric country where everyone is slaughtering each other, what do you do? Of course, one becomes a child-soldier, a Child-Soldier to eat and to slaughter in turn; That's all that's left. (p. 100)

The mafia militias become the sole "employer" in Liberia and Sierra Leone, enlisting "child soldiers" for heinous tasks. In Sierra Leone, Kourouma includes the tragic episode that has marked international opinion for its cruelty: the amputation of the upper limbs of civilians – "The amputations were general, without exception and without mercy. When a woman showed up with her child on her back, the woman was amputated and so was her baby, regardless of the age of the infant. We might as well amputate the baby citizens because they are future voters" (p. 179).

In both countries, militias loot, ransom, and massacre under the gaze of a hesitant and sometimes guilty international community; the novel highlights the prevarication of the heads of state of the West African regional community, whose differences and struggles for influence weighed on the conflicts. The ECOMOG intervention force, poorly equipped and poorly paid, is illustrated according to Birahima by blind and brutal violence against the populations it is supposed to protect. With no elections, no functioning states, schools, hospitals, or institutions of solidarity, the two countries sink into the informal economy of predation – a world totally unsuited to the experience of children immersed in war.

Social and Cultural Disintegration and the Child Soldier

The erosion of traditional social structures plays a crucial role in the exploitation of child soldiers. In many West African societies, family and community networks traditionally protected children and provided stability. However, decades of war, economic hardship, and displacement have weakened these protective structures, leaving many children vulnerable to recruitment. This disintegration is dramatized directly in the novel: Birahima loses his mother at a very young age and is left to his own devices in a world where violence is the only rule. Like him, thousands of children are torn from their families, forced to kill or to witness the death of loved ones, breaking their emotional and social ties. The novel highlights the absence of protective parental figures and the collapse of traditional values in war zones: children, instead of being raised in a family setting, are trained to obey warlords who become their only landmarks.

Displacement caused by war and poverty forces millions of children into refugee camps or onto the streets, where they become easy targets for armed groups. Without access to education, health care, or a stable home, many children see militias as their only means of survival. In addition, the glorification of violence in some war-torn societies normalizes the recruitment of child soldiers; some children see joining an armed group as a way to gain power, revenge, or social status. Some rebel groups exploit cultural traditions, such as initiation rites, to indoctrinate children in their ranks, further blurring the line between traditional warrior roles and modern warfare.

This destruction of community structures compounds post-conflict reconstruction: in the novel, villages are ravaged, families dispersed, and survivors haunted by the atrocities they have experienced. Former child soldiers, often rejected by their communities, find themselves with no place once the war ends; stigmatized, traumatized, and unable to find alternative livelihoods, they remain vulnerable to re-recruitment. Without long-term social and economic reintegration programs, the cycle of exploitation continues—a point Kourouma makes by showing that even the rare survivor who escapes (like Birahima returning to his cousin the doctor) carries an unhealable wound.

The Role of Resource Exploitation in the Recruitment of Child Soldiers

The exploitation of natural resources plays a major role in perpetuating armed conflicts in West Africa and facilitates the recruitment of child soldiers. Wealth in diamonds, gold, oil, and other valuable resources attracts not only multinational corporations and governments but also armed groups that use them to finance their activities. In these conflict zones, children are often forcibly recruited or manipulated to work in mines, to serve as combatants, or to be exploited in logistical and military activities. This is precisely the "war economy" Birahima documents: the militias "have divided up the territory," enriching themselves on diamonds and rubber while leaving the child soldiers—whose real stakes they barely measure—as expendable cannon fodder. Natural resources, instead of promoting the development of the countries concerned, thus become a curse that fuels violence, strengthens militias, and endangers thousands of children trapped in these

conflicts. The trope functions in the novel not as background detail but as the economic engine of the moral collapse that converts children into weapons.

Kourouma's Narrative Style and Vernacular Expressions

Ahmadou Kourouma adopts a particular narrative style that reflects the orality of African traditions and anchors his story in a living language, marked by expressions drawn from local languages such as Malinké. The narrator, Birahima, expresses himself with a raw, direct, often grammatically incorrect language, which gives the novel a spontaneous and authentic tone. This stylistic choice accomplishes several things:

1. **Giving a voice to the people.** By using a language that mixes French and words from African languages, Kourouma creates a hybrid language that reflects the linguistic reality of the former colonies. This "broken" French opposes academic and official French, often perceived as the instrument of the elites and former colonial powers.
2. **Reflecting the chaos of war.** The disjointed syntax and repetitions mirror Birahima's mental disorder and the absurdity of the world around him. The novel does not follow a classic narrative, which corresponds to the loss of reference points for the narrator and his environment.
3. **Creating an oral effect.** The narrator's use of parentheses, interruptions, and comments gives the impression of a story told aloud, as in the African oral tradition, reinforcing the proximity with the reader and lending Birahima's testimony a striking authenticity.

By playing on language in this way, Kourouma indirectly criticizes the colonial legacy that imposed a foreign language on African peoples, while showing how this language was appropriated by local populations to express their own reality. This linguistic subversion is not incidental but central to his sociocritical project: the very medium of the narrative performs the resistance his themes describe.

A Counterreading Considered: Is Allah Passive?

Before concluding, it is worth engaging the divergent reading proposed by Folorunso (2007), who holds that the themes of the novel are negative, that the presence of Allah is passive in scenes of war (otherwise there would be no wars), and who characterizes Kourouma as "a communist ideologue" excluding God from human existence. This interpretation, while provocative, misreads the novel's title and its irony. The phrase "Allah n'est pas obligé" — "Allah is not obliged" — does not assert divine absence but rather divine non-accountability: the title indicts not God but the human order that has stopped expecting grace or justice, that has normalized atrocity to the point where no celestial correction arrives. Kourouma's target, as this article has argued, is not God but the corrupted adulthood that refuses to be obliged to its own children. Where Folorunso sees an ideology of godlessness, a sociocritical reading sees the transference of the question of responsibility from the heavens to the political structures on earth — precisely the "displacement of responsibility upward" that the novel's irony performs. The "negativity" of the themes is not a philosophical claim about the divine but an indictment of a human order that has forfeited its moral legitimacy.

Conclusion

In short, Ahmadou Kourouma, with so many other African novelists, recounts the loss of meaning. The analysis of his texts has shown how the African societies of independence allowed the order of "bastardy" to take hold—a generalized disorder, a new state of the world in which men, beasts, and things mix freely, and in which all the essential borders that guarantee the order of the world have been stretched and evaporated. Kourouma's writing explores the complexities of the political and historical landscape of recent Africa. History functions as a representation of the present, a projection of the future, and a warning. Historical consciousness, transformed by the imagination, allows us to understand our position in the present and to become aware of how the society in which we live has come to be. Kourouma, like a historian, unearths and excavates what is already buried, even forgotten. Collingwood (2016) argues that the past does not exist entirely independently of the present but always lives within it; the value of history lies in its teaching us what humanity has done and, consequently, what humanity is. In revealing how warfare annihilates not only lives but the very possibility of childhood itself, Kourouma reframes the child soldier as the living testimony of a society that has forfeited its moral legitimacy and, with it, its future.

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