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Across more than two thousand years, very few political theorists have captured the cyclical nature of regime changes as accurately as the famous historian Polybius. The theory of anacyclosis, an evolution through which political systems dismantle from a virtuous ruler into corruption, followed by the collapse, remains a pertinently relevant framework for analyzing cases of political decay. Although it has classical origins, the theory helps explain how modern states – more specifically, those that are in the midst of foreign interventions, civil war, and internal fragmentation – fall into an extended episode of dysfunction in which they become entrenched. The purpose of this paper is to explore how the Polybian cycle shows the political forecasting of Libya, Afghanistan, and Somalia, three sovereign states that are widely recognized as archetypes of state failure in the current twenty-first century.

A “failed state” is described as a state whose government institutions can no longer exert legitimate control over its territories, provide essential services, and the inurement of security. Libya, Afghanistan, and Somalia exemplify these criteria with exponential clarity. Each state has had its own experiences with prolonged domestic conflicts, competing warlords or factional rulers, the rise of extremist groups, or even criminal organizations that exploit the power vacuums, and the dismantling of centralized governance. These symptoms reflect not just modern geopolitical strains but also the ever-changing things that Polybius observed in the ancient world: the transitions from tyranny to anarchy when governance collapses. As Polybius wrote, “All political systems are destined to change, and each contains within itself the seeds of its own destruction.”¹ His warning frames this investigation into how the structural decline of these states has permitted cycles of despotism and unrest to persist.

This research paper argues that Libya, Afghanistan, and Somalia showcase modern case studies stalled within anacyclosis, the arrest between the Polybian cycle of tyranny and anarchy. In each case, political order decayed to the point where the state could not maintain stability under radical authoritarian rule, nor progress to a functioning democratic system. Yet, the vacuum enabled warlords, terrorist organizations, and criminal networks to prosper. By filtering Polybius’s theory through these case studies of failed states, the analysis shows how ancient political insights remain vital for acknowledging the persistent severity of contemporary states and the global security threats that result.

Polybius’s theory of anacyclosis highlights a continuous cycle in which political systems adapt through the predictable stages: monarchy à tyranny à aristocracy à oligarchy à democracy à

anarchy, eventually making its way back to monarchy. The progression captured exactly what Polybius witnessed as the inevitable moral decay within each governmental form, where virtue erodes, corruption flourishes, and collapse is right around the corner. In today's context, the cycle overlaps with the political indicators that are utilized to measure state fragility, using the Fragile State Index (FSI), which scores and evaluates the legitimacy, rule of law, and public service aspects.

Polybius's insight into the degeneration of political systems helps forecast why some states fold from the inside out. According to the Polybian model, the authoritarian leadership ("monarchy" in its virtuous form, or "tyranny" in its degenerate form) decays when leaders abandon their virtue for self-interest. The ending result of "anarchy" then creates a way leading to chaos and violence for power struggles among factions, which may or may not lead to a stable government. The main argument of this research paper is that these contemporary states, especially those of Libya, Afghanistan, and Somalia, are permanently arrested in the stages of tyranny and anarchy and are unable to escape full evolution, as their institutions have disintegrated beyond any form of repair.

Libya's experience after the toppling of Muammar Gaddafi illustrates how quickly a political rule can dissolve into warlordism when the central authority of a state evaporates. One analyst observed that "The absence of a unifying central authority after Gaddafi's fall produced a fragmented state ruled by militias rather than law."² The situation finally got to the point where the state of Libya became a safe haven for violent militant factions; as another report observes, "The Benghazi assault was a stark reminder that Libya's power vacuum had become a sanctuary for violent extremism."³ These observations signify the significant and precise dynamic structure that Polybius described. A tyrannical regime dissolves, and no legitimate government is structured to emerge in its place. Yet, competing armed warlords and groups fracture the state, causing an endless progression of chronic instability.

Similarly, Afghanistan and Somalia follow this trend. In all three case studies, the transition of authoritarian control to a new form of government with zero central authority or legitimate governance echoes the Polybian shift from tyranny to mob rule. More so, the inability to establish a legitimate form of government becomes self-reinforcing, without any strong institutions, national security deteriorates from within; without a state having security, the established institutions cannot recover or be rebuilt. In Polybian terms, the cycle becomes stalled, entrapping societies in disorder.

Afghanistan's modern history showcases a society in a stalemate within the destructive CenterPoint of the Polybian cycle. For nearly half a century, the country has oscillated between two periods of authoritarianism and widespread anarchy, each growing into the next. As Ahmed Rashid states, "Afghanistan's modern history has been an unending pendulum between centralized tyranny and localized chaos."⁴ The pendulum described is one that is captured precisely in the stalling point of anacyclosis: authority emerges without any legitimacy, then

proceeds to collapse, and it eventually is replaced not by any reformers but by further instability and chronic disorder.

From 1979 – 1989, the Soviet-backed People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) regime had heavy influence during this authoritarian rule that triggered a heavy resistance from the mujahideen. When the Soviet Union pulled out of Afghanistan, the regime crumbled, and Afghanistan descended into complete and total anarchy during the 1990s. Warlordism now had a death grip on Afghanistan and carved into fiefdoms; state-backed institutions vanished, and violence prospered and flourished domestically.

This created a vacuum that the Taliban utilized for their emergence, using false hopes of the Taliban restoring order. From 1996 to 2001, the rule returned to a tyrannical rule – harsh, absolutist, and repressive. This stage was halted by the United States government right after the deadly attacks on the U.S. homeland. September 11, 2001, marked the beginning of the toppling of the Taliban and the urgent establishment of a political order within a state that fought back against them, unable to form a legitimate government in Kabul. Thomas Barfield, a respected anthropologist, explains that “When external powers leave, the political vacuum is filled by the same actors who thrived in chaos before.”⁵ His string point signified prophetic: during the United States’ withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021, the Taliban quickly reestablished control of the country.

Yet even though a renewed authoritarian rule was established, Afghanistan remains in a state of instability. The 2021 Kabul Airport bombing, carried out by the terrorist group known as ISIS-K (ISIS-Khorasan), only solidified the argument that Afghanistan had not escaped the grip of anarchy. Instead, violence is in a continuous state of competition with the authoritarian government. The regime remains unable to seize full control of the country and exploit the weakness of the state by sharing propaganda for extremist groups, hoping for recruitment, funding, and operational actions against foreign states/groups. Polybius would argue that Afghanistan never reentered or saw a virtuous phase of centralized control; it leapfrogged straight to tyranny and anarchy and has been in the same cycle between these two stages with no positive progression forward.

The cycle remains current and has allowed criminal networks and designated terrorist organizations to thrive. For example, Afghanistan’s opium economy has become a financier for both the Taliban governance and other rival extremist groups. The clear and present dangers they present create a persistence of these illicit structures reflect the inability of the Afghan state to be restored to a legitimate regime, an outcome that was correlative predicted by the Polybian model of institutional and even moral decay.

Afghanistan only exemplifies the oscillation between tyranny and disorder; however, Somalia is a case study that showcases a near-permanent state of anarchy. Since the dramatic fall of Siad Barre in 1991, the state of Somalia has endured one of the longest stints of centralized state collapse in modern history. The country takes Polybius’s final stage of political

degeneration with true significance: a condition in which there is no established central authority, and the competing factions domestically rely exponentially on violence to maintain cohesion of their own localized forms of order.

Somalia's downhill slide began with the political collapse of the dictator Barre, who was an authoritarian ruler from 1969 to 1991, which had devolved into a classic case study of a tyrannical government marked by repression, corruption, and the country's neglect of the economy. Once, Siad Barre's tenure was abruptly ended, and Somalia fragmented swiftly. Militant clans fought to try to establish control of the city of Mogadishu and the surrounding regions, leading to chronic humanitarian disasters and insecurity. The chaos set the stage for the infamous 1993 Black Hawk Down situation, which was a blunt illustration of how violent Somalia had fallen into the anarchical phase.

The expulsion of the functioning state created the breeding ground for extremist movements. The Islamic Courts Union (ICU) had temporarily formed order in a part of the country; however, it was displaced by Al-Shabaab, who continues to wage conflict today. One scholar in Somalia explains that "Somalia's anarchy is not the absence of order but the presence of competing order sustained by violence."⁶ This suggestion echoes Polybius's warning about anarchy and how it does not bring any form of freedom but instead is the breakdown of civic virtue and constitutional governance.

Al-Shabaab has positioned itself to assume institutional roles for the state, adjudicating disputes, imposing taxation, and overseeing commerce in areas where it still has a strong hold. As Roland Marchal observes, "Al-Shabaab has become both a religious and economic actor, filling the governance vacuum left by the absent state."⁷ The outcome is a hybrid system in extremist organizations that performs as state-like functions while at the same time destabilizing the country through violence.

Somalia's instability has spread beyond its borders. The piracy crisis of 2008-2011, during which Somali pirates had targeted international waters known as shipping lanes, demonstrated how domestic anarchy can spill into international waters, creating global criminal networks. Another example is the 2013 Westgate Mall attack in Kenya and the 2019 DusitD2 bombings, only further illustrating the reach of Somali-based terrorist groups. Somalia is highly unlike Afghanistan and/or Libya mainly due to the fact that it has not passed through alternating phases noted by Polybius; instead, the case study shows that it has remained in still waters in the final stage of the cycle for more than three decades.

Libya models another vivid case study of a state in which authoritarian leadership collapses and creates a prolonged vacuum filled by competing armed militias. Under dictator Muammar Gaddafi, Libya has experienced decades of centralized, personalized rule, which is characterized by the concentration of power, manipulation of tribal groups, and the political suppression of dissent. Though Gaddafi's tenure displayed the expected characteristic of tyranny, it was able to oversee enough cohesion to prevent internal uprisings and fragmentation.

The 2011 revolution that saw the end of the rule of Gaddafi completely created a new passage for this dynamic. Yet instead of transitioning into a more suitable and controllable political system, Libya fragmented into multiple rival militias, a coalition of tribal groups, and factions of ideological groups. As Frederic Wehrey recounts, “The absence of a unifying central authority after Gaddafi’s fall produced a fragmented state ruled by militias rather than law.”⁸ The descent models Polybius’s depiction of an anarchical stage that follows the collapse of a regime ruled by corrupt leadership.

The security dilemma rapidly brought extremist organizations stateside. The vicious 2012 Benghazi attack, which placed a target on both a U.S. diplomatic outpost and a CIA annex, highlighted the advanced degree to which militant groups had become entrenched in the country. One Congressional Research Service report that was published emphasizes, “The Benghazi assault was a stark reminder that Libya’s power vacuum had become a sanctuary for violent extremism.”⁹ The new proliferation of ISIS-affiliated local cells, smuggling routes, and human trafficking networks reinforced Libya’s new title and status of a failed state.

By the late 2010s and early 2020s, Libya finally fell effectively into a “militia state” – a system in which armed groups hold de facto political leverage. Rival governments located in Tripoli and Tobruk deepened the fragmentation, while foreign powers supported opposition factions, which only further complicates efforts at any national reconstruction. As with Afghanistan and Somalia, Libya never progressed forward with the cycle. It only moved from tyranny to anarchy without entering any form of stability within the cycle.

The repercussions of this have extended beyond the borders of Libya. The country has established itself as a major center for human trafficking, arms dealing, and smuggling, and even as a transnational organized crime epicenter. Migrants moving through Libya towards the Mediterranean face systemic abuse, yet criminal infrastructures profit from the political collapse of state-regulated institutions. These allow for the precise security threats that Polybius acknowledges would arise when a political system such as Libya loses moral discipline and legitimate institutions.

In the cases of Libya, Afghanistan, and Somalia share key features in which reveal a broader pattern of political decay. All three demonstrate how the dissolution of legitimate authority leads to the rise of illicit economies, violence, and illicit economic acts. As Phil Williams argues, “The fusion of terrorism and organized crime in failed states represents one of the most significant threats to global security.”¹⁰ His assessment can be applied with force to these three states.

Libya, which exhibits robust smuggling networks, such as human trafficking across the Mediterranean to Europe. Afghanistan, which relies heavily on opium trading, is a financier for insurgencies, corruption, and even terrorism. Somalia which has an advanced experience level with piracy, clan-based taxation, and the funding of insurgent groups through charcoal smuggling and extortion.

The illicit systems become more self-perpetuating when states lack the ability to enforce laws and regulations or even provide alternative livelihoods for their citizens. This only results in the environmental argument that Polybius makes that political systems collapse when they lose their morality and institutional foundation, which is vitally necessary for any form of self-governance. As an adapted interpretation of his work puts it best, “Without moral and institutional renewal, societies remain trapped between despotism and disorder.”¹¹

A centralized insight from comparing these cases is that even foreign interventions often disrupt but never resolve the Polybian cycle. In Afghanistan and Somalia, foreign powers, just like the United States, removed authoritarian regimes but ultimately failed in the fact that they establishing stable successors. In Libya, the interventions made by NATO toppled Gaddafi but left a gaping hole, which fractured the political landscape with no navigable road for reconstruction. In all three cases, the absence of a coherent strategy for building a new legitimate governance of the state has caused the arrest of the cycle.

Another commonality is the pattern of the rule by warlords. For instance, when authority fails, local strongmen fill the void. These actors provide slim to none security but completely undermine national cohesion. Their existence shadows Polybius’s warning about the extreme dangers of political systems in which individuals seek power in order to achieve personal gain rather than civic virtue. The evolution of warlordism in these states has only prolonged their stagnation between tyranny and anarchy.

The forecasting for Libya, Afghanistan, and Somalia reveals the enduring relevance of Polybius’s theory of anacyclosis. Each of these states demonstrated how the political system can become locked in two stages/phases when institutions lose legitimacy and their moral authority withers. Instead of completing the cycle, they stall in the two most destructive stages, which only creates an environment in which terrorism, warlordism, and organized crime thrive.

Rebuilding failed states needs more than military interventions, whether that’s from foreign governments or domestically, or technocratic reform. Instead, it demands the trust of the government, reconstructing institutions, and the restoration of civic virtue. Global security and stability depend not on a partisan ideology but on the capacity of a state to rebuild its legitimacy. The examples of Libya, Afghanistan, and Somalia demonstrate that with the lack of renewal, states remain stalled in the destructive midpoint of anacyclosis – caught between the cracks of despotism and disorder, unable to escape the grip of the political vacuum at the center of their collapse.

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