Africa: Changing Politics in a Changing World

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Abstract

Like the international system in which it is embedded, Africa is in throes of multiple and multi-dimensional change. Most of this change is taking place simultaneously at different levels and is driven by factors that are mutually reinforcing. The sources of the change which the continent is undergoing are both domestic and external, and the change process is underwritten by a variety of local and global actors. The broad contours of change such as it has been unfolding over the last six decades have been well documented and debated in the literature. What has historically provoked dispute and disagreement - and continues to do so - is the interpretative frame by which the dynamic and import of change are understood. This essay suggests that the dominant and long-standing approach in African studies of treating the continent as a specimen apart for which special analytic tools and conceptual frames are required has no justification in theory and practice, and has run its course. African studies can no longer simply be reduced to a domain for a competitive recounting of pathologies about a continent, especially because the questions about which it is pathologised are present elsewhere but are understood and characterised differently. Change in Africa, as change elsewhere in the world, proceeds in a contradictory manner comprising an admixture of advancements and regressions in a complex dialectic that embodies - and endows - specificities but which does not justify a one-sided narrative about the African world as an unyielding terrain of pathologies.

Key Words

change in Africa, African politics, African studies, characterising the changes, Africa and the West

Introduction

Over the last three decades, the contemporary international system has witnessed significant shifts that suggest the beginnings of the end of the Western-led global order that emerged and was consolidated after the Second World War. That global order cemented a Pax Americana on the basis of which much of world affairs were to be organised in the post-1945 period. The most prominent institutional expressions of the Western-dominated order were - and symbolically - remain the United Nations and most of its family of organisations, including, notably, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, and bodies such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Although debates are rife about the nature of the new order that is emerging, there is now very little disagreement that the previously unassailable dominance enjoyed by the United States both alone and with its core allies is under severe strain as new centres of power have emerged or re-emerged into global significance and, in so doing, triggering a process of re-alignment of interests that is still underway (Ikenberry 2008, Jacques 2009, Turner 2009, Wade 2011, Layne 2012, Rachman 2016, Layne 2018).

Amidst the changes taking place in global affairs, different regions of the world are also grappling with changes of their own. In this regard, the African continent has witnessed and is the site of ongoing changes that have touched on all aspects of politics, economy, and society. As with the changes taking place in the international system, there is no agreement on how best to qualify and grasp the changes going on in Africa both generally and with specific regard to politics. The task of characterising the changes occurring is not made easy by their unevenness and the dispersed or seemingly disconnected ways in which they are unfolding. That task is at the heart of debates in African studies about the progress and prospects of the continent some six decades after the march to independent statehood began. In reviewing the context and content of the changes taking place in African politics, this essay offers a broad critique of some of the dominant interpretative approaches in the African studies, literature and suggests that the time has come to transcend the tendency to characterise power and governance on the continent as a domain of the exotic and esoteric that requires particular forms of characterisation for understanding it.

A World in the Throes of Change

There may be no consensus about the exact point in time when the wheels of change in the contemporary international order began to turn – and it may even be futile seeking one – but it would not be far-fetched to trace the roots of changes to the decade of the 1970s. This was a period of stagflation in the leading economies of the world, a context which partly underpinned the decision of the Richard Nixon administration in the United States to devalue the dollar and terminate its peg to gold as to mark the formal end of the Gold Standard - or what was left of it. The intellectual and political assault which was launched by the Chicago Boys against the dominant Keynesian post-Second World War global economic policy framework for domestic policy-making and global economic governance was fed and also fed into the lacklustre performance of economies around the world to pave the way for what Paul Krugman and others have characterised as a counter-revolution in development thinking and policy making (Krugman 1992). By the end of the decade of the 1970s, with a constellation of conservative governments in power in the US (Ronald Reagan), UK (Margaret Thatcher), Canada (Brian Mulroney), and Germany (Helmut Kohl), the neo-liberal age of free-wheeling and unidirectional market liberalisation was ushered in even as the state was assailed on various fronts with a view to rolling back its frontiers and cutting it down to size (Mkandawire and Olukoshi 1995, Mihevc 1996, Olukoshi 1998, Mkandawire and Soludo 1999).

In the course of the 1980s, as the radical free market ideas championed by Milton Friedman and his associates in the Chicago School moved from the realm of ideas into the world of policy – making and political action, the neo-liberal triumph was packaged and presented as a Washington Consensus on the basis of whose doctrinal precepts, economic – and eventually social – policies were to be conducted around the world. The IMF and the World Bank, two institutions borne out of post-1945 Keynesian development thinking and mandated to play key stabilising roles in global economic governance, were recast to become both bearers and enforcers of the new Washington Consensus. It was a task which they undertook across Africa and the rest of the global South using an array of conditionalities clauses whose intent was to foist the neo-liberal policy framework on beleaguered and/or reluctant governments as structural adjustment programmes. These policies comprised a set of orthodox measures and tools designed to free markets and retrench the state. They stood in contradistinction to the heterodox policies that Keynesianism promoted as part of efforts at better managing the boom and bust cycles of capitalist accumulation that had provoked the Great Depression of 1929 (Sodersten and Reed 1994, Mkandawire and Soludo 1999, Stiglitz 2002, 2006, 2010).

At the same time as the neo-liberal orthodoxy was gaining in hegemony around the world and quickly assuming the status of the new orthodoxy to which countries were required to conform from the 1980s onwards, significant developments were also unfolding in the geo-political arena that carried far-reaching consequences for global politics. Easily one of the most important of these developments was the chain of inter-related events that resulted in the collapse of the Berlin Wall in November 1989, the reunification of Germany in October 1990, the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 along with the formal winding up of the Warsaw Pact and the COMECON. These events combined to mark the formal end of the historic East-West Cold War as we knew and experienced it for much of the 45-year period from 1945 to 1990. The bipolar structure of global power organised around the competing military-strategic, economic, and politico-ideological interests of the old Western and Eastern blocs immediately went into decline even as Russia and its erstwhile allies in the defunct Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact/ COMECON busied themselves with managing their complex - sometimes chaotic - transitions away from communist central planning and the single vanguard party political model towards more liberalised economic and political systems.

With the end of the classic Cold war came a process of realignments of interests around the world that ushered many countries in the old Eastern bloc led by the defunct Soviet Union into independence, including countries carved out of the old Yugoslav Republic as it also dissolved into various countries. One immediate outcome of the developments was the opening up of the European Union to an enlargement towards the Eastern Europe with a view to the rapid incorporation of many of the countries that were previously part of the Soviet Union into its integration project. At the same time, the Russian Federation, readjusting itself to the post-Soviet era, took measures to secure its immediate neighbourhood through cooperation arrangements with some of the countries with which it shares boundaries. Furthermore, the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) through which mostly - though not exclusively - newly independent countries, many of them African, sought to navigate an autonomous middle ground and space amidst the sharp East-West polarisation of the Cold War years began a slow death that was accelerated by the death in 1980 of one of its remaining original prime movers, Josef Broz Tito, and the subsequent collapse of Yugoslavia.

Triumphalist claims such as those initially made by scholars like Francis Fukuyama (1992) about the 'defeat' of the Soviet Union and its model of state-led and communist-inspired central planning under the supervision of the vanguard party by the Western liberal political and economic

model gained resonance in many circles around the world. However, as many critics pointed out and subsequent events demonstrated, they turned out to have been both overstated and premature. Nevertheless, they did provoke short-lived global policy and political conversations about the harnessing of a post-Cold War peace dividend from which the world economy as a whole might benefit and to which countries such as those of Africa could look in order to lift themselves out of a prolonged state of underdevelopment. Although there were considerable motions in the global aid community led at the time by the Group of Seven (G7) countries to step up development assistance, the verdict by the end of the 1990s was that the peace dividend had not been delivered. Also, with the end of overt East-West ideological-military competition for strategic alliances around the world – Africa having been one of the main Cold War battle fields – and the initial retrenchment of Russia's global reach, Western countries felt comfortable to pursue a new political conditional in their dealings with African countries.

The essence of the new political conditionality was to encourage the ideological-political allies of the West at the height of the Cold War to accede to domestic pressure for governance reforms by opening up their political systems. These pressures built up in intensity both on account of the hard-biting effects of the deflationary structural adjustment programmes of the IMF and the World Bank on the populace across Africa and the harsh measures that different governments deployed in order to overcome citizen resistance to deep and prolonged austerity amidst collapsing living standards, declining public services, and decaying physical infrastructure. In Africa, as elsewhere in Latin America and Asia, discontent against the twin processes of austerity and repression boiled over and translated into street protests that came to be known as the 'IMF Riots' of the 1980s. On account of the sustained resistance to and violent protests against austerity and a pattern of immiserisation, some long-standing dictatorships buckled and fell in a first wave of regime changes in the global South. From Ferdinand Marcos in the Philippines to Anastacio Somoza in Nicaragua, Gafar El Numeiri in the Sudan, and Jean-Bedel Bokassa in Central Africa Republic, to cite a few of them, several of the symbols of post-1945 'strong man' politics were driven out of power and into the dustbin of history.

The popular pressures for political reforms that gripped Africa and which played out during the 1990s as to culminate in the restoration of electoral pluralism in most countries were part of a broader vector and indicator of change in post-1945 world affairs, namely, the third wave of democratisation in the international system which Samuel Huntington (1991) documented. Beginning in the lead up to the mid-1970s in Southern Europe, spreading to Latin America and Asia-Pacific in the 1980s, and Eastern Europe and Africa from the end of the 1980s into the 1990s, the third wave of democratisation also fed into the emergence of and was, in turn, reinforced by a new phase in globalisation propelled by a revolution in information and communication technologies (ICTs). This ICTs revolution contributed significantly to the accelerated integration of economies, especially financial markets, around the world, exponentially increased the velocity of cross-border capital movements, extended the frontiers of global commerce, facilitated the emergence of new cross-border political, social and cultural communities, launched the world into the age of the global media and real time news, and helped propel an assortment of non-state actors unto the world stage as important players.

The emergence into prominence of non-governmental actors with a capacity to mobilise and act on a global scale was a significant new development which added to the erosion of the monopoly of the state as the sole effective and overwhelmingly dominant actor in world politics. Soft power may always have been present in world affairs, evidenced, for example, by the influence exercised by the church but the structured global role which non-governmental actors came to enjoy in setting, shaping

and monitoring international agendas and standards of behaviour around development issues and global public goods has been a novel one. Over time, even the monopoly of the state over military weapons and its ability to project hard power was to be severely challenged by an assortment of transnational organised criminal groups trafficking drugs, people, and weapons, and fanatical religious organisations raising armies to wage war within and across national boundaries. Simultaneously, a new generation of private military contractors licensed by the US government as part of a doctrinally-inspired programme for the privatisation of war came into existence and began to offer their services for hire, often secretively, by governments around the world. Yesterday's mercenary logic was repackaged into a new profit-oriented private business domain specialised in the markets for wars around the world.

Globalisation also carried with it a generalised redistribution of economic power and political influence whose sum total has been a major and continuing shift of capacity and influence away from the West and towards the East. At the heart of this ongoing shift in the locus of global economic power is the re-emergence of China as an economic powerhouse and a leading pole of global economic growth. China's re-emergence has been accompanied by a gradual expansion of its political influence and the enhancement of its global reach through a rapid and continuing enhancement of its military capability, the spread of Chinese soft power, and the deployment of its trade, financial and investment prowess worldwide, including through the New Development Bank, the Construction Bank, and the ambitious new silk road and belt initiative. Along with China, India is another re-emerging power whose ongoing transformation carries global implications and adds to the weight of Japan, the East Asian Tigers, and the Gulf states, as well as the efforts by Russia to reassert a global role to give a distinctively non-Euro-American character to the reconfiguration of global economic power and political influence that is unfolding.

Significantly too, contemporary globalisation, even as it has opened new frontiers and integrated markets with propulsion from technological innovations and sustained economic liberalisation, has also generated new heights of inequality within and between nations. Inequality as a fallout and discontent of globalisation has intensified alongside persistent problems of poverty. Although large numbers have been lifted out of poverty in recent years, especially in China, poverty levels have remained quite high around the world, including Africa and the Indian sub-continent. Poverty and inequality have, in turn, fuelled a dynamic of exclusion and a politics of marginalisation some of whose effects have been played out in complex experiences of conflict, criminality, extremism, displacement, migrations, xenophobia, and populist politics witnessed in different places around the world. The picture that emerges is of an increasingly globalised world that is successfully integrating markets and scaling ever new technological heights but hobbled by persistent poverty, soaring inequality, an inability to promote inclusive growth and development, and costly failures to accommodate and manage diversity.

The end of the old Cold War temporarily opened up prospects for a stemming of the global arms race but that slowdown turned out to be rather short-lived. In the context of the realignment and redistribution of power among countries and regions around the world, a new arms race has been triggered and various key players in the international system are opening new geo-strategic frontiers. Underpinning the new arms race is a desire to deter and contain potential or actual rivals, and enhance capacities for forward-deployment as may be required by circumstances. Thus, as Russia has been re-asserting a global role and investing in the modernisation of its arsenal, NATO that once seemed moribund has been revived and has been proliferating a strategic deterrent presence across Eastern

Europe. Similarly, as China has been rapidly building up its military capability and establishing military bases offshore and abroad, the United States has responded in kind by reaffirming it Asia-Pacific alliances and presence, and driving a project of militarisation around the world, including the entire seaboard of the African continent (Lundestad 2013).

Summing up, it would seem that although it may still be premature to proclaim a decisive end to the era of Pax Americana, evidence of the deep and continuing erosion of the American-led and Western-dominated post-1945 order is overwhelming and growing. This has already produced a new multi-polarity that opens new spaces for state and non-state actors to manoeuvre in world affairs. At the same time, it has made world politics much more complex than it has ever been given the range of interests that are at play at any one time on any major issue, and the delicate balances that must always be struck among them to avoid a wholesale systemic breakdown or a direct confrontation among the most powerful. The multilateral system as established after 1945 under the umbrella of the United Nations continues to survive though buffeted and strained by multiple pressures from diverse sources that partly speak to the imperative for comprehensive global governance reforms in general and a reconfiguration of the United Nations Security Council in particular.

An Africa Experiencing Multiple Changes

Change such as it has been going on in world affairs has been refracted into the Africa and fed into the domestic fabric of the countries of the continent alongside internal structural and conjunctural contradictions that generate pressures of their own for change. Both the external and internal drivers and dynamics of change, including their points of convergence and divergence, have generated new questions and recast old ones about the state, citizenship, and politics that have challenged existing structures of governance and the adaptive capacity of leaders. From severe strains to the integrity of the boundaries of the nation-state and mounting domestic pressures for politico-administrative reforms to the revival of various shades of identity politics and demands for greater participation and inclusion, governments and political leaders have been buffeted with calls for far-reaching change. The quality, speed, and relevance of the responses offered by governments and political society have varied from country to country. However, on aggregate, the impression is strong among the generality of citizens that a widening gulf seems to separate those entrusted with state power from the citizens in whose name that power is supposedly exercised.

At independence from the second half of the 1950s onwards, the countries of Africa, most of them categorised as low income economies, uniformly embarked on state-led models of development. This was so regardless of the official ideological leanings they professed in the context of the Cold War politics of the time. Without exception, whether claiming to the socialist, marxist, capitalist, market liberals, or humanistic, they invariably adopted an active interventionist role for the state and took measures to involve the governments in the commanding heights of their national economies. This they did through, among others, the creation of public enterprises, the nationalisation of strategic economic assets, and establishment of state investment vehicles for joint venture activities with foreign investors. Development planning was also widely practiced and policies aimed at indigenising/Africanising economies were pursued together with tariff policies designed to substitute certain categories of imports with domestic production. The development policies carried out by the countries were largely in accordance with the prevailing Keynesian wisdom of the times around the world (Mkandawire and Soludo 1999)

Although most of the countries attained independence on the basis of multiparty systems of

politics, ruling elites were soon to argue that the overwhelming need to prioritise development, accelerate national integration, and focus national energies on the twin project of state and nation-building made it necessary to temporarily suspend or even outrightly abandon competitive politics and, instead, embrace single party regimes. Multiparty politics, it was suggested, was alien to African culture, tended to reinforce ethno-regional and religious divisions, contributed to fanning the embers of secession, and generated cyclical instability and violence. Moreover, competitive politics among multiple parties was premised on zero-sum calculations that ruled out the idea of a 'loyal' opposition and the ideal of magnanimity in victory. By the same token, the principle of majority rule and minority rights had little or no place since winners tended to take all and losers invariably lost all. The one-party system was, therefore, advocated as an alternative that allegedly offered a much better chance of promoting national unity and overcoming underdevelopment, as well as ensuring the political stability necessary for progress.

On the face of things, and given some of the early experience of post-independence violence, the argument for a shift from a multiparty system to a single party regime may have seemed impeccable. However, in most cases, single party rule very quickly degenerated into rampant and unreconstructed dictatorships that neither delivered unity nor development – and which in time became itself a driver of conflict and instability as discontent and disaffection gained ground against the personalisation of centralised and concentrated power by rulers who themselves played parochial ethno-regional and religious politics. The coup d'état became a frequent occurrence in different countries of the continent, sometimes instigated or enabled by the East-West Cold War rivals in their competitive search for pliable regimes which could be counted as political allies and relied upon to offer strategic footholds. Thus it was that the first two decades of African independence were characterised by a ubiquitous statism in economic and political governance. The projects of unity and development were constituted from above and the state assumed the role of the sole legitimate and effective driver.

The groundwork for the emergence of a new phase in post-independence politics and development was laid during the course of the 1970s when, as part of the policy efforts to overcome stagflation in the world economy, the recycling of the petro-dollar surpluses of the OPEC countries that were cumulated after the oil price revolution that began in 1973 left the international system awash with liquidity. The excess liquidity was converted into various credit arrangements from which African countries benefitted in what was a prelude to a pile up of external debt that became unsustainable and was generalised into a balance of payments crisis (Sodersten and Reed 1994, Mkandawire and Olukoshi 1995, Mkandawire and Soludo 1999). That crisis left most African countries vulnerable to the adjustment programmes of the IMF and the World Bank. Besides their deflationary thrust, the adjustment programmes were also anti-state. The 1980s saw crisis-ridden African economies subjected to extreme shock therapies that shook the foundations of the state-led model of development and destroyed the post-colonial social contract between state and society. Popular resistance to the adjustment policies was met with repressive measures as governments became more authoritarian. Instability was rife across the board and demands for broad-ranging political reforms became louder as the 1980s wore on.

By the end of the decade of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s, mass street protests, beginning from Cotonou in Benin Republic and rapidly spreading to other African countries, compelled governments to abandon single party systems, military regimes, and civilian-military diarchies, and convene sovereign national or constitutional conferences to debate and adopt a new consensus-driven framework for governance. This process also translated into the reinstatement of

multiparty politics, the restoration of individual and group freedoms, rights, and liberties, efforts at curbing presidential powers, instituting new checks and balances, enabling various governance bodies to serve as independent, non-partisan arbiters and protectors of the public interest. Constitutional provisions were also made for the creation of national human rights commissions, national election management bodies, constitutional courts, etc. Investments were made in electoral system reforms with a view to enhancing confidence it and opening up possibilities for broad-based participation. In some cases, special dispensations were adopted to encourage the participation of women in politics and their representation in various public institutions, including parliament. Decentralisation policies were also introduced to delegate or devolve power to newly-enabled second and third tiers of government.

In all, it would be fair to argue that the 1980s/1990s in Africa witnessed concerted efforts aimed at a radical and accelerated reversal of the statist model of development and governance that characterised the first two decades of independence. The pursuit of free market economic reforms under the tutelage of the Bretton Woods institutions and various bilateral donors was subsequently accompanied by a liberal system of electoral pluralism driven by multiple political parties. Indeed, an important part of the work carried out in the course of this period focused on how to better underpin the drive for market-based reforms with complementary governance political-institutional reforms that were packaged as a campaign for 'good governance'. As suggested by the World Bank after a decade of structural adjustment reforms, to have tried to carry out far-reaching market economic reforms without a commensurate effort at undertaking governance reforms was like having 'Hamlet without the Prince of Denmark'.

However, despite the promise that the liberalisation of markets would, after some initial pain, restore Africa to the path of economic growth and social progress, many of the countries either suffered economic and social regression or remain trapped in a prolonged state of stagnation. Poverty remained widespread, unemployment grew, factories collapsed as the continent de-industrialised, the physical infrastructure decayed in too many places, social policy was retrenched along with the social expenditure of the state, and inequality grew. Even as dire economic and social conditions prevailed, competitive politics appeared, on the face of things and at one level, to gain ground – and to even yield the fall of some long-term rulers, the peaceful alternation of power from one ruler to another, and eventually alternation from one ruling party or coalition to another as some oppositional forces gained ground and won competitive elections. Elections became ubiquitous, the media terrain – print and electronic – was liberalised, civil society groupings active in different domains were licensed to organise and operate openly, etc. Legal and judicial reforms were accompanied by security sector reforms carried out with the express purpose of strengthening the prospects for democratisation. Specific measures were adopted in many places to encourage the greater participation and representation of women in politics and public affairs.

Some commentators, focusing exclusively on developments on the African political terrain of the 1990s, were to proclaim – way too hastily – that the continent was undergoing a 'second liberation' (Olukoshi and Wohlgemuth 1995). Although many ancient regimes lost power in the face of popular pressures for change, there was, at another level, a plethora of challenges which saw transitional politics in some of the countries of the continent degenerating into the intra-state conflicts of the 1980s and 1990s which were characterised by Mary Kaldor and others as Africa's new wars (Kaldor 2012). Claiming a huge toll in lives and properties, these intra-state conflicts were mainly fought with various light weapons, created large-scale internal displacement and refugee problems, pitted armed civilian

groups against conventional armies and against one other, witnessed the recruitment and deployment of narcotised child soldiers and female combatants on a large scale, saw the security forces of the state going rogue and becoming soldier-rebels or 'sobels', involved the trafficking of drugs and various natural resources by different warlords and factions, and often entailed the use by all sides of scorched earth policies, the wanton rape of women and girls, and the despoliation of the environment (Kandeh 2004).

In the worst cases, the violent conflicts that unfolded in different parts of Africa during the 1990s resulted in the full or partial erosion of central governmental authority over varying periods of time in places like Somalia, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Rwanda, Burundi, Guinea Bisau, and the Democratic Republic of Congo, to cite some of the best known cases. In many other countries, although central governmental authority remained by and large in place, violent instability was widespread. From the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, the Casamance region of Senegal, and the Algerian civil war to the multiple conflicts that wracked the Sudan, the war in Congo-Brazzaville, and the conflict in Uganda involving the Lord's Resistance Army, various countries were faced with armed conflicts that took a toll in lives and property. The various conflicts all added up to create the image of a continent in a perpetual state of violent conflict and disorder. The situation was to become a key focus of the international community mainly under the auspices of the United Nations as various conflict management and peace-building initiatives were launched aimed at restoring stability.

Beyond the cases of the countries where troubled transitions degenerated into civil war, there were also concerns that gradually built up with regard to the reach and depth of those that appeared on the face of things to have made some success of their adoption of electoral pluralism. Questions and contestations have built up and persisted with regard to the integrity of elections, some of these taking a violent turn. Political parties have remained mostly weak and dependent on ethno-regional and religious constituencies. Internal party democracy has mostly been in deficit and intra-party violence over positions has been rife. The system of checks and balances has not functioned as effectively as was initially hoped, with the executive dominating parliaments and judiciaries that have remained pliable and easy to manipulate. Corruption and mismanagement by public office holders, including those elected by the citizenry, has been a common feature of politics and public administration. Elected governments have appeared to be overwhelmed and hobbled in the delivery of quality and accessible services. Across the continent, governments have struggled to deliver the much-awaited dividends of democracy to the citizenry. Amidst this, attempts have multiplied – some of them already successful – to roll back media freedoms and civil rights, rein in civil society groupings, and amend constitutions to remove term limits to the befits of incumbents.

Underlying the discontents of ongoing democratisation processes and the apparent inability of elected governments to deliver cogent socio-economic results to the bulk of the populace has been the persistence of neo-liberal policy frames in the design of public programmes and expenditures. Regardless of the fact of manifesto programmes presented by political parties to the electorate and the alternations achieved from one government to the other or from incumbent ruling parties to opposition ones, macro-economic policy has remained unchanging and the scope for social policy severely constrained by inflation-targeting considerations. The consequence is what Mkandawire has described as a proliferation of 'choiceless democracies' whose inability autonomously to pursue policy priorities that speak to the citizenry and the demands of a given context has hollowed out the spirit of a second liberation which some felt in the 1990s when long-serving dictatorships and single party regimes began to give way to a new generation of leaders and a multiparty system (Mkandawire 1999).

The unidirectional market-liberalising structural adjustment economic policies that were introduced in the late 1970s into the early 1980s and which persisted into the 1990s and beyond, exacting social costs along the way, stood in diametric opposition to the logic of and requirements for the democratisation of the political space. The core of economic policy-making was effectively taken out of or insulated from the democratic process even as the kinds of negotiation and compromise that yield policy heterodoxy were blocked to ensure the triumph of a pre-determined orthodoxy. The consequence has been a direct one: Amidst the motions and rituals of democratisation from the 1990s onwards, the result that has been registered across the board is that 'plus ca change, plus c'est la meme chose'. And nothing perhaps better symbolised the complexity and contradictions of the contemporary African political transition than the fact that as it unfolded in the 1990s and the world celebrated the formal end of Apartheid with the inauguration in 1994 of Nelson Mandela as the first democratically elected President of South Africa, a genocide of unspeakable proportions was going on in Rwanda.

If the economy and its ability to deliver tangible social benefits to the populace has been one of the Achilles heels of the experience of African democratisation, the tide seemed to become much more favourable at the dawn of the new millennium when, after some two decades of decline and stagnation, countries across the continent began to register GDP growth. Not only did economies start growing again, this growth, averaging 5 to 6 per cent annually, was sustained for almost eight straight years until it was dampened by the onset in 2007/2008 of the global financial and economic crises that became the Great Recession. Considering that Africa's return to the path of growth occurred at the time of lacklustre growth performance in Europe and the United States, exuberant narratives soon proliferated celebrating the rise, at last, of Africa. The metaphors used to depict this were many but easily the most prominent was the notion of Lions on the move popularised by McKinsey Global Institute (MGI) (2010, 2016).

According to the Africa Rising narrative, not only was economic growth taking place on the back of sound macro-economic indicators and improved governance institutions, domestic markets were also expanding rapidly based on improving purchasing powers propelled by a growing and globally-networked middle class. The frontier nature of African economies and incentives put in place by governments to improve the environment for doing business meant that investors could harvest rates of return that are superior to what is on offer elsewhere in the world. Evidence of the attractiveness of African economies for investors included spectacular stock market returns, healthy foreign exchange reserves, generally stable exchange rates, rapidly improving ICT infrastructure and penetration, increasingly sophisticated banking systems and domestic capital markets, generous tax rebates, and limited capital controls. Improved investments in education and public health amidst the youthfulness of the continent's population is bound to assure a steady pool of skilled labour needed by investors (Mahajan 2008, MGI 2010, 2016, Economist 2011, Perry 2012, Robertson 2012).

Considered at a broad level, the Africa Rising narrative spoke to the rapid changes taking place in Africa which ought to be acknowledged. The rapid population growth which the continent in experiencing, with about 60 per cent of that population younger than 35 years of age clearly carries significant long-term implications for politics, economy, and society. So too does the accelerating shift of population from the rural to urban centres across the continent and the on-going emergence of megacities in different parts of the region. Yet for all the potentiality which these changes offer and the possibilities which a return to economic growth seemed to promise, the Africa Rising narrative understated the fact of the commodity-driven nature of the GDP growth that occurred in the first decade of the new millennium and the precariousness of such a dependence. Little wonder that once

the Great Recession set in and the commodity boom which countries had enjoyed in earlier years turned into a bust, the impact was immediate as growth fell below 3 percent per annum and exchange rates, external reserves, and balance of payments came under pressure even as stock markets suffered severe instability mainly in a downward direction. The commodity-driven growth that Africa enjoyed may have yielded higher revenues for governments but it did not translate into the onset of a structural transformation in the economies of the continent.

Even as growth episodes go, the experience which Africa recorded in the first decade of the new millennium and the Africa Rising narrative built on it have been challenged on the grounds that the level of growth was not high enough to make a significant difference on poverty. The consequence was that even as Africa was purportedly rising, the absolute number of the poor was also growing. The benefits of the growth that took place, even as it fell way below the potentiality of the continent, were also not evenly distributed. As a result, inequality increased. Failure to take advantage of growth to leverage the diversification of economies away from their narrow commodity base and dependence meant effectively that economies remained overly vulnerable to external shocks and efforts at domestic value addition did not happen in any significant way. Thus it was that the growth that took place did not generate employment on a scale that could make a dent on the crisis of unemployment in most countries, especially youth unemployment. Matters were not helped and continue to be exacerbated by the parlous state of the physical infrastructure in too many countries whose effect has been to make the cost of starting and running business to be high for most budding entrepreneurs (ECA 2013, Rowden 2013).

Politically, some African ruling parties, especially in Francophone countries, attempted to profit from the Africa Rising narrative whilst it still *de rigeur* by presenting plans for emergence from low to middle income status to their citizens. These plans may have come across as statements of ambition but in the face of harsh domestic socio-economic realities, rampant corruption among the political elite, and growing inequalities, they did not seem to inspire much immediate trust and hope in the generality of the populace as to constitute a possible basis for a new state-society bargain. Rather, amidst a climate of uncertainty, the pressure has built on the youth in a large swathe of the continent to migrate in order to seek supposedly greener pastures elsewhere. The desperation to escape grinding poverty and exclusion, and concern about the absence of some hope for a future at home has translated into human tragedies across the Sahara and the Mediterranean as hordes of migrating youth undertake perilous journeys away from the continent. The situation has also translated into vulnerability by the youth to alternatives offered by criminal gangs, drug cartels, and insurgency groups mobilising in the name of religion to challenge the secular state and all that it stands for. Across the entire Sahel and to the Lake Chad basin, from Central Africa Republic to East Africa and the Horn, restive groups populated by the youth are waging insurgencies that challenge the existing order and seeking to supplant it with a theocratic ideal.

Understanding Change in Africa

Clearly, from the foregoing, change such as it has happened in Africa has been a mixed bag. Signs of advance have been interspersed with stagnation and reversal. Progress where it has happened has been slow and fragmented, and has required considerable effort to sustain. Interpreting the African world in such a context has been an enduring challenge for African studies as evidenced by the succession of interpretative frames that have been advanced over the years to try to make sense of the trajectories of the continent. These interpretative frames have historically been embedded within a binary opposition

of Afro-pessimism and Afro-optimism. For the Afro-optimists, every hint of progress and success has been seized upon to proclaim a season of hope in Africa while for the Afro-pessimists, the all too frequent experience of political crisis and development failures simply serve as fodder for a déjà vu of an enduring gridlock on the continent. The tragedy for the Afro-optimists is that change and progress are not unilineal either in Africa or indeed anywhere else and the dynamics that produce or obstruct transformation at any point in time are tied to relations of power that are not easily given to logical sequencing of outcomes. As for the Afro-pessimists, it is equally their tragedy that their penchant for seeing Africa as little more than a dark spot in a dynamic world is all too frequently shattered by glimpses of the potentiality embodied by the Africa when its energies are periodically unlocked and the message that they convey that the underdevelopment of the continent is not a fatalistic condition to which it is condemned for all time.

Arguably, the oscillation between Afro-optimism and Afro-pessimism that has been integral to discourses about Africa are as diversionary as they are irrelevant to the actually unfolding politics of development taking place across the continent. Beyond the dualism of Afro-optimism and Afro-pessimism, three broad and inter-related approaches have predominated in the literature about contemporary politics in Africa and what may or may not be changing about it. To one degree of the other, the three approaches draw inspiration from theories of modernisation and in many respects are updated adaptations of them. One category of the literature focus on the resilience of tradition and ethno-regional allegiances in African politics, the second concentrates on neo-patrimonial dynamics in the African political arena, while the third focuses on the instrumentation of disorder by political elites for self-gain.

Regarding the body of literature which focuses on the deadweight which ethno-regionalism constitutes for African politics, the argument is that, historically as contemporaneously, politics and participation in Africa has been underpinned, conditioned and polarised along ethno-regional lines some of whose roots hearken back to ancient 'tribal' rivalries. The consequence has been that the political landscape has been generally fragmented with parties drawing support from primary ethno-regional constituencies and mobilising support less on the strength of their programmatic initiatives and more through an appeal to primordial sentiments (Lentz 1995, Bates 1974). Not only is the task of state and nation-building made that much more difficult in such a context, the building of consensus around policy and politics is also rendered near impossible. Politics tends to be a zero-sum winner-take-all game and as such the stakes involved in competitive elections are very high as much for winners as for losers. Not surprisingly, electoral violence is rife in the system and ruling factions using an admixture of carrots and sticks to hold on to power. Nepotism is embedded in the political culture and feeds corruption. In instances where religious identities are brought into the mix of ethno-regional politics, the struggle for power becomes even more toxic. Multiparty politics may have initially offered a pathway towards the modernisation of politics. However, the promise was short-lived and a dynamic of the 're-tribalisation' of politics has been in evidence.

While, without doubt, African countries, like most other countries around the world, multi-ethnic and multi-religious in composition, it is not clear why the expression of ethnic and other identities on the continent should be seen as a specifically African pathology that is not only unique to the region but also uniquely dysfunctional in the region. In the absence of such clarity, ethnicity has been treated in the African context as extremely rigid and unchanging, conferred with a weight that overwhelms every other identity that individuals carry in a world of multiple identities, denied of its civic dimensions, and seen as a domain that is impermeable. Furthermore, analysis has been carried

on as though years of post-colonial nation-statism in Africa has counted for nothing, including public policies for forging greater national integration and individual choices exercised by a significant number to cross established boundaries through, for example, marriage and sites of labour. When, as often happens, political processes defy all expected ethnic pathologies, the temptation has been to see such developments as aberrations. Thus it is that the ethno-regional reading of contemporary African politics has diminished our understanding of the dynamics of diversity management and coalition-building on the continent (Mafeje 1971, Ake 1993, Nnoli 1998).

Building on the theme of nepotism and corruption which are rife in African politics, the literature on neo-patrimonialism focuses on the network of relations, be it within the state or in society, that has transformed politics into a web of patron-clientelist relations that effectively stymie the normal functioning of institutions, enthroned 'big manism', and reduced the public treasury to a giant trough into which elites freely dip their snouts. Political competition such as it exists is a game that is played out between different elite factions each of which seeks to keep a grip on its constituents through the distribution of prebends. Economic policy is oriented to serve the rent-seeking impulses and imperatives of the elites and their ever-growing appetites for resources necessary for oiling their political machineries. Politics itself is hardly about serving a public purpose and more about grabbing power for the sake of power and prestige. State-based neo-patronialism organised from above by political elites corrupts societal forces and dissipates pressures from below for reform. Society-based neo-patrimonialism coming from below places pressures on public officials and institutions as to undermine their capacity to function according to standards of transparency, predictability, and effectiveness expected of them. In both cases, whether arising from below or from above or even a combination of the two, the neo-patrimonial logic perverts democratic norms and principles. Thus it is that efforts at democratisation that began in the late 1980s into the early 1990s has neither advanced sufficiently nor met the basic requirements to qualify as being described as truly democratic (Bayart 1993, Van de Walle 2005, Bach and Gazibo 2012)

The neo-patrimonial approach has, easily, been the most popular interpretative framework embraced by Africanists to explain the failure both of recent market-based economic liberalisation efforts and experiments with political liberalisation to yield the outcomes expected. What has been problematic about the neo-patrimonial approach, however, is its packaging and presentation in the African studies literature as primarily, if not exclusively an African problem which speaks in comparative terms to a distant past in Western political culture that was overcome through reforms and institution-building. Its claim about the omnipotent and omnipresent sway of neo-patrimonialist pressures and forces in African politics and development is thus anchored on the absence or weakness of institutions in what effectively becomes a circular argumentation which, heads or tail, can only lead to one predictable conclusion. Also, where in Africa, neo-patrimonialism is seen as a (congenital) disease afflicting politics and development on the continent, elsewhere around the world, similar patterns of relations among actors are celebrated as evidence of an abundance of the social capital that makes for successful polities and an embedded system of trust that underpins them. Remarkably, the neo-patrimonial approach has been deployed across disciplines to seek to explain every facet of politics, economy, and society in Africa. In so doing, its claims to being a universal frame of analysis reduce it to an omnibus construct which captures as much as it misses and robs it of an ability to deliver the nuance that the complex dynamics of change in contemporary Africa demand (Mamdani 1990, Mkandawire 2001, Pitcher *et al.* 2009, Mkandawire 2015).

In a bid to transcend the weaknesses of the neo-patrimonial approach, although never really

getting out of its established paradigmatic boundaries, another body of literature has concentrated its efforts on the instrumention of disorder by African political efforts. The premise of this approach is a straight forward one: Efforts at bringing order and predictability to the African world whether by way of liberal economic and/or political reforms ultimately fail because elites who should be the domestic bearers or enablers of reforms actually do profit from chaos and disorder that is integral to the political culture and economic policy making. This instrumention of disorder has its own rationality and that rationality underpins how and why Africa actually works (Chabal and Daloz 1999). It is an argument that comes across as, at once radical and cynical. Its offer of a seemingly radical departure from dominant arguments about African political and development failures remains embedded in an approach that treats the continent as a peculiar terrain for which special explanatory variable(s). Its cynicism derives from the assumption that the instrumention of disorder is a permanent condition from which there is no clear exist. For clearly, although instrumention of disorder may be boiled down to how Africa allegedly really works, it is also by definition a dead end. Yet, dead ends, by their logic, also invite action for change and this approach offers no possible to grasp the politics of change no matter where it originates from.

Transcending Received Wisdom in African Studies

The principal bane of the mainstream approaches that have dominated the interpretation of contemporary politics and development in Africa is their tendency, directly or indirectly, to seek to understand dynamics on the continent in a flawed comparative framework that measures the continent against stylised narratives about governance and change in other regions of the world, especially the West. Proceeding from a premise that what Africa is experiencing is similar to what societies in the West went through in a distant or not-so-distant past, an idyllic picture of economy, politics and society in the West is then constructed against which African realities are assessed. Yet, that idyllic picture is a far cry from historical experience and/or contemporary reality in the West. Its effect, however, is that perfectly similar processes in Africa and the West, sometimes happening simultaneously, are characterised in radically different ways that generate more questions than they answer for the critical mind with a global comparative lens. At one level, the approach reproduces in the knowledge sector, the lopsided historical relations of power between Africa and the West. At another level, it reduces African dynamics to a collection of pathologies for which experimental remedies are to be imported in the quest for solutions. In the end, the politics of reform in a season of change becomes little more than an exercise in the mimicry of Western 'models' and 'blueprints'. Translated into policy, it has made of Africa, a giant experimental laboratory for a succession of schemes ostensibly aimed at getting governance and development right.

Much of the African studies literature on contemporary African politics has been centred around competitive naming and labelling for various allegedly African pathologies. Fuelled by an academic rat race and a frenzied competition for policy relevance, the field has been littered with an endless succession of adjectives aiming to offer encapsulate the nature of the African political economy. The resultant tower of babel has generated considerable noise but too little by way of conceptual clarity, originality, and/or innovation that could help enrich our understanding of change in Africa and strengthen the field of African studies itself (Zeleza 1997). Overcoming this state of affairs has been a long-standing challenge and meeting the challenge will involve, as a starting point, a recognition that although Africa, like other regions of the world, does have its historical and contemporary specificities, it is also part and parcel of a global mainstream of political, economic, and social change

with all the implications for the way in which power is structured, used, abused, and reproduced. Such an approach may show that, comparatively, Africa may have much more by way of commonalities with the rest of the world than the dominant literature concedes. In the end, the big challenge may not necessarily be one of how Africa could be helped to become like the rest of the 'advanced' world – a world which, itself, is locked in a struggle between the forces of decomposition and recomposition – but, rather, how all over the world, governance, both locally and globally, may be reinvented to once again place the citizen at the centre of policy and politics.

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