



**PERSPECTIVES ON AFRICA'S CRISES:  
THE CHALLENGES OF SOCIO-POLITICAL  
AND ECONOMIC TRANSFORMATION IN  
THE 21ST CENTURY**

*edited by*

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## *Chapter Three*

### *The nature of Africa's political system*

Remi Aiyede

#### *Introduction*

In the beginning of the 21st century, Africa faces a challenge to seize the opportunities of this era to come out of underdevelopment, poverty and insecurity, to stamp its feet on the global arena as a force to be reckoned with in an increasingly globalised world. The urgency of this challenge is underscored by the poor performance of sub-Saharan Africa in key indices of development in the past two decades, and the subsequent economic and strategic marginalisation of Africa in the world context. For instance, as at 2004, no country in Africa has been able to achieve the status of a high-income country. In 2002, Sub-Saharan Africa accounts for eleven percent of the world's population but accounts for less than three percent of the world's Gross Domestic Product (GDP). According to the Human Development Report published by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 2002), while East Asia was able to reduce poverty between the mid 1970s and 1990, social conditions in sub-Saharan Africa worsened during the same period. Africa entered the new millennium five percent poorer than it was in 1990. The report also observed that in sub-Saharan Africa, only South Africa has less than ten percent incidence of child malnutrition, while six countries within the continent have more than forty percent of their population malnourished. The report states further that forty of forty-four sub-Saharan countries, with ninety-three percent of the region's people, grew too slowly. Half are poorer than in 1990.



Eleven of the world's twenty poorest countries are to be found in Africa. Since the report noted that the poorest countries in the world have suffered most from conflict, it is not surprising that Africa has produced a substantial size of the world's refugees. Africa's debt stock has also continued to increase.

It is generally acknowledged that these scenarios cannot be reversed without political transformation. Occurrences within the African continent and the world in general has led to a recognition of the political question as central to development in other spheres especially economic development. Indeed, there is now a universal recognition that development is essentially political, especially with the publication of the 1997 World Development Report by the World Bank, that had until then denied the political nature of development. The engagement with the political system and politics has thrown up a series of studies on the nature of the African State. The nature of Africa's political system has been critical to her continuing backwardness and underdevelopment. Many scholars have stated this point in several ways. Ake (1996a: 20) for instance says the African crisis "is precisely a crisis of politics, especially a crisis of anti-democratic practices". In an earlier study in 1989, the World Bank had stated that 'underlying the litany of African development problems is a crisis of governance'. The 1997 Report explored this theme further, as governance is used to mean the exercise of political power to manage a nation's affairs. The report maintains that the state plays significant roles in the development process. These include establishing the foundation for law, maintaining a non-distortionary policy environment, including (macroeconomic stability, investment in basic social services and infrastructure, protecting the vulnerable, and protecting the environment). The bottom line is that the capacity of the state, its strength or weakness as seen in the political



institutions and processes as earlier argued by Migdal J. (1988) is very critical to development.

However, understanding how the political system comes to negatively affect development has proved to be a thorny issue. There is indeed a lot of theorising on the nature of the political crises in Africa. The state and politics in Africa have been described by such concepts as Prebendalism (Joseph 1987), Sultanism, predatory rule (Lewis 1996), Politics of the belly (Bayart 1993), Criminalisation of the state (Bayart, Ellis and Hibou 1999), Spoils Politics (Allen 1995), Neo-patrimonialism (Sandbrook 1985, Hyden 1983), Praetorianism (Diamond 1995), Bureaucratic politics (Allen 1995, Mars 1986), Personal rule (Ake 1994, Bratton and Van de Walle 1997), and Decentralised despotism (Marndani 1998). Each of these characterisations seeks to capture the essential feature of the political system in Africa. In good measure, they have offered just as much explanation as confusion to our understanding of the nature of the African political system.

These theories, while reflecting varying symptoms of the political crisis, have been challenged for several reasons. Questions have been raised about the very foundation on which some of them have been constructed. Claims of prejudice, racism and 'afro-pessimism' are said to underlay some of them, being largely intellectual outputs of non-Africa based 'imperialist' Africanists.

This chapter assumes that the theories reflect approaches to the study of African political system and attempts a foundational description of the African political system. It also presents decentralised despotism as the most apt. This is because it helps us get over the question of whether there is a model that effectively captures the realities of an African political system, by adopting a mode of rule approach that establishes Africa as a single unit of analysis. Beyond this, we will look at the African political system as dynamic, hence the adoption of a

historical perspective. Moreover, the African political system has emerged as a part of the global system of states and global capitalism, hence the focus on three epochs in the life of the state in Africa.

### ***Is there an Africa Political System?***

The idea of political system relates to the whole idea of how a people are governed. It has at its centre the state. But it includes political institutions and formal processes of government and the dynamic interplay of ideas and interests (Derbyshire and Derbyshire 1991:3). Thus, the first question that comes to mind is whether it is meaningful to talk about a concept of the African political system. Or put in another way, is there an African state? As we know, Africa is a diverse continent with about fifty separate countries (states). The diversity of Africa is such that Thompson (2000:1) in the opening paragraph of his book, 'An Introduction to African Politics' writes that:

Africa has a lot to offer the student of politics. It has it all. Autocrats vie with democrats; governments espousing socialism neighbour those bound by liberal constitutions. Some states are a model of stability, while others are near the point of total collapse. Multiparty systems jostle with one party states, and social divisions based on ethnicity, religion, class and race all challenge political leaders in their attempts to maintain order.

The politics that these realities create make Africa a stimulating and rewarding place to study.

In this diversities, are there elements general, dear and essential enough to constitute features of an African political system? Is there a plurality of forms of the political system in Africa? To be sure, these are legitimate



questions for any attempt to describe the political system in Africa. Political scientists who have tried to confront the challenges of generalisations about African politics have raised these questions. Hence Chazan, (1988) and others recognised that 'there is not one but many Africas' and Tordoff, W. (2002), admits that to 'lump these states together and talk about African politics is somewhat misleading'. Since these statements were not strong enough to prevent these scholars and others from talking about African politics, in what ways did they dispose of these questions?

One way the scholars have gone about it is to limit generalisations to 'common characteristics of the New African States. The characteristics are usually identified by the frequency of their occurrences: military coups, one-party states, corruption, ethnic politics etc.' A second approach has been to present a single form of African politics without bordering to recognize differences between states and regions. A third approach identifies a number of forms of political systems that have occurred frequently in post-independence African history, and illustrate them with individual states. All of these approaches have their own strong and weak points, even when they claim to get to the roots of the crisis of the African State. One general weakness of these approaches is their unclear policy implications (Allen 1995). Some of them fail to account for the three key elements of the political system in Africa, viz.: the historical process of state formation in Africa, and as such the specificity of the African state; the subsisting relationship between citizens and the state; and the political economy of capitalist development that have a strong influence on modern Africa's political system.

This chapter, in trying to overcome these weaknesses, will explore the nature of Africa's political system in its dynamic nature, as it evolved from the pre-colonial through colonial to the post-colonial period. The post-colonial period is further broken down into the cold war and the

post cold war periods as they capture major momentum in the political transitions. In doing these, it will review major theorising on the African State while taking off from Mamdani's theory of decentralised despotism as providing the most salient character of Africa's political system as a colonial legacy.

### ***The African Political System in Crisis: A Critical Review of the Discourse***

Theorising on state crisis in Africa may be grouped into two broad schools of thought according to their point of departure, and several strands of arguments teased out of each of the schools. The first school of thought takes off from the view of the state as captured or as an instrument of exploitation by a class or coalition of groups or classes in pursuit of its/their own narrow interests. This school may be subdivided into (a) that which perceives the state as a captive of a coalition of urban-based interests: the urban coalition theory; and (b) that which views the state as compradoral, an instrument in the hand of Africa's comprador capitalists for the furtherance of the interests of foreign capital: the comprador theory. This school is identified on the score that it perceives state crisis not in terms of the state's weak capacity, but as the outcome of the use of the state to misappropriate and misallocate national resources for the benefit of a group(s) or class(es).

The second school of thought is the weak capacity state school. Here the emphasis is on the capacity of the state to carry out the normal functions of a state in the modern world. African states are said to be weak and vulnerable. They are neither able to mobilise popular commitment and support nor work out and ensure stable rules in politics. They are unable to define and implement coherent policy programmes being as they were overwhelmed by their own 'incoherence, indiscipline and shrinking fiscal base' (Sandbrook, 1985: 38). Three strands of the



argument may be teased out in the effort by this school to explain the pathology of African states: Neopatrimonial theory, organisational theory and monopolistic theory. For this school, African states are soft or weak, and incapacitated, not that they misallocate resources.

### *The Urban Coalition Theory*

The urban coalition theory was popularised by Robert Bates in his effort to explain the failure of agricultural policies in Africa. Bates carried out his research from the perspective of the new political economy or what is called the rational choice theory, which attempts to apply the methods of bourgeois economics to the study of politics. The public choice or new political economy perceives public policy as the outcome of competing interests, where individual political actors, household, enterprises, groups and coalitions mobilise resources to influence political decisions in pursuit of material ends. With regard to Africa, Bates (1981) sought to address the phenomena of inequality and coercion; to examine the institutions and organisations through which these are perpetuated and choices aggregated and constrained. As he puts it, 'Why should reasonable men adopt public policies that have harmful consequences for the society they govern?' Bates found an answer in the relatively small group of politicians/bureaucrats/soldiers who dominate the state and use it to extract surplus from agriculture to satisfy their narrow self-interest and to buy up support by conceding to the demands of urban-based interest groups. Extracted surplus is channelled towards private enrichment and in exchange for support of powerful urban-based elites and groups. The coercive strength of the state is then to suppress the protest by the rural poor, rural-based autonomous organisations. (Bates, 1981:112). In the same vein, Lipton (1998) argues that the State has been hijacked by a coalition of urban groups who act as a class. For him, these urban groups are strong because of their ability to control

and organise which place them at a great advantage over their rural counterparts. State failure is perceived as resource misallocation, the diversion of public resources to rent-seeking unproductive zero-sum activities. The African state has given in to the political pressure of rent-seeking groups. This misappropriation and misallocation thesis became very influential at the Bretton Woods.

### ***Comprador theory***

The term comprador is derived from the Portuguese word used in reference to trading agents of imperial China. These agents were middlemen who mediated between the foreign coastal enclaves and the hinterland and in the process accumulated personal wealth. The comprador theory uses the term to refer to some similar characteristics of the African state and its ruling class. The African bourgeoisie is described as neither nationalist nor productive. They are therefore not capable of genuine national development. They constitute a class of middlemen who use the state to buy goods and services often of doubtful value but at inflated costs from foreign firms and businessmen, and in the process collect commissions and rents (Beckman, 1988). A very incisive description of this situation is Turner's 'commercial triangle' of foreign capital, Nigerian middlemen and state officials. The state is dominated by comprador officials who perform a 'kind of gatekeeper function' they allow entry and exit of goods and in the process may exact a 'toll' for performing the service of opening the gate (Terisa Turner, 1981: 159). In this way state resources are siphoned, misdirected and misallocated for private purposes and into private accounts in foreign banks. The comprador theory represents a nationalist radical critique of imperialist activities and their local lackeys. As Beckman also notes, the revelation of massive corruption and mismanagement in the studies produced by committees and commissions of inquiry in Nigeria for instance support this view. Compradorists do not deny that corruption and mismanagement aggravate inefficiency; they claim rather that they were largely influenced by external factors, apart from being often necessitated by foreign intervention in African



countries; that the post-colonial state is both undemocratic and alienating. They sometimes also point to the origin of the African crisis in the deterioration of foreign lending conditions, the debt trap, scarcity of soft concessional lending and rising interest rates; the impact of multinational corporations and mass decapitalisation and local displacement (Onimode Bade, 1992: 10).

Amin Samir (1991) contrasts the role of the state in peripheral African countries with those of the state in advanced capitalist societies. According to him, the mastery of accumulation, by which he means the hegemony of the bourgeois class, in the centre defines, advanced capitalism or capitalism in its completed form. In the centre the state is not only able to maintain the domination of capital, it is equally able to determine the conditions of accumulation through its control over the reproduction of the workforce, the market, the centralisation of surplus, national resources and technology. The state is able to subordinate external resources to the logic of national or what he calls 'auto-centred' accumulation.

On the contrary, although the peripheral state serves to maintain the status of the dominant class, it is unable to control local accumulation. This is because capitalism is not full fledged and civil society is feeble. The private sector is little developed so that economics seems 'little more than an appendage to the exercise of state functions'. The state is dominant in economic life but its function is reduced to that of adjusting the local economy to the demands of accumulation at the centre. The character of the direction that adjustment takes is determined by the directions taken by the central powers (Amin 1991: 309-310).

### **Neopatrimonialism**

This theory is concerned with state politics and how these serves to weaken the state and occasion decline in the economy. Sandbrook

(1985) argues that while the state elsewhere has facilitated capitalist development, African states are overwhelmed by their own incoherence, indiscipline and shrinking fiscal base. This state of affairs, he maintains, results from the absence of a capitalist hegemonic class that is capable of enforcing discipline and coherence on the state. In the absence of such a class, personal rule holds sway. Personal rule in turn leads to the privatisation of governance as the state becomes penetrated by personalised relations based on personal and communal ties. The state becomes a tool for the fulfilment of personal and communal aspirations, reduced, as it is, to an instrument for the distribution of patronage. Because the state rather than entrepreneurial activity is the chief source of surplus, the bureaucracy is carried further away from the Weberian model; lacking essential characteristics of hierarchy, technical competence, discipline and neutrality it gives way to reinforcing spiral of political decay and economic decline. It is a fictitious state of armed men which detaches itself from society and preys upon a dying economy.

Similarly, Goran Hyden (1983, 1990) argues that the unofficial economy is generally predominant in Africa. Appropriation is more informal and circulates in a network specified by relations of affection. This type of relations based on informal and historical bonds rather than exchange corresponds to the predominant peasant mode of production in Africa. The peasant mode is predominant because of the limited capitalist penetration of the society, the low level of commodification. In Africa, economic activities revolve around personalistic ties, involving the immediate or extended family, lineage relations, village or community bonds and religious obligations. This social relations, which he describes as the 'economy of affection', accounts for the patronage and ethnic politics in Africa. This is the case because the post-colonial state is not an organic outcome of this peasant mode of production. The state is suspended in mid air above society. It



rests on the personalised relations between men rather than the productive system. In this circumstance, it is difficult to enforce the performance of obligations as in exchange relations. The crisis of the state results from the contradiction between the logic of a modern state based on economic contract/exchange relations and that of the African society based on covenant/affectionate relations. The ruling class is simply not able to 'exercise systematic power' creating a problem of incompetence and inefficiency.

Ake (1994:7) on his part argues that the state in Africa has limited autonomy and is immersed in class struggle. For him, the limited autonomisation of the state is the result of the limited development of the productive forces, the limited capitalist penetration of the economy and society. The duality of the society makes the state merely a coercive force unable to transform power into authority, and domination into hegemony. The development of the productive forces has not attained a level that allows for the realisation of the law of value hence the preponderance of primitive accumulation typified in the privatisation of the state for economic gain. Because of the high level of development of the state and the absence of a strong indigenous capitalist class, the state had to spearhead development. The development effort of the state expands its reach and its resources. The state appears to intervene everywhere and to own virtually everything including access to status and wealth. The struggle to win state power becomes 'a matter of life and death'. Politics becomes warfare. The unmediated contradictions within fractions of the dominant class, and the intense struggle for power and resources divert attention from economics to politics. This leads to a tenuous relationship between the ruling class and the economy. The ruling class is therefore unable to live up to its historical role as agents of development. What is more 'power is often over-concentrated and fused in the presidency, political competition is notoriously intense and

Hobbesian, while other even more fundamental conflicts may be organised out of existence'. The organisational state although able to mobilise resources for the purpose of human emancipation on a relatively large scale also carries along the danger of costly failure. This is because the problem of inefficiency lies in the fact of organisation, not in the delusions, venality and incompetence of individuals (p.19). People within organisations remain individuals with their own aspirations and interests. These interests are conditioned by social and cultural institutions and technological imperatives as well as economic realities. Yet the organisation is structured in such a manner that individuals are expected to respond to its impersonal demands while it operates in such a way that it depends on no one in particular. Because people remain individuals, organisation takes on human form when issues like promotion are discussed and goods are sold (bureaucratic politics) to customers. Although the organisational structure is designed to check these influences, it sometimes does not succeed. Organisation therefore holds the potential for success as well as failure. Organisations do decline.

Mars, Theo (1986) also notes that the state as a chain of organisational relationships may be adversely affected by a problem at any vital point of linkage. This may even affect the functioning of the entire state system. The important points of linkage between the different organisations of the state include the point between administrators and technical experts, and among all of these as citizens. Mars, T, (1986) goes on to enumerate some of these cases within the African state: the persistent problems of political interference with the workings of the bureaucracy (politics/administration relations); the conflict between central administration and service departments, parastatals and public service. Struggles between these groups may occasion decline or degeneration, as manifested in the use or looting of public organisations by politicians for election purposes, and the dependence of parastatals on the state.



The point emphasised here is that the problem of the state is that of the chain of organisations that constitutes it. Each organisation can only be understood in its relatedness and wider context of organisational relationships. The chain is like a market relation that exploits the potentialities of putting different combinations and making them serve a purpose beyond themselves. The modern state organisation is only showing signs of obsolescence in need of fundamental repair.

For Klitgaard Robert, (1989) what has led to the breakdown of the state organisation, especially the bureaucracy is the wage level of workers, which has become too low to attract and retain either needed talent or support performance. The fiscal crisis of the state resulting from heavy debt and other external adversities has been translated into drastic fall in real wages in the public sector and the compression of salary scales, eroding in the process, incentives to public employees. This results in brain drain, inefficiency, moonlighting and demoralisation and corruption. When these phenomena becomes generalised, government starts to breakdown. More foreign technical assistance is required, adding to both debt and dependence. The business of government shifts from development to predation.

### **Monopolistic Theory**

This theory takes us to the origin of the state as the engine of development in the colonial era following the failure of the market in the depression of the 1930s. According to Dutkiewicz and Williams (1987), in a clear presentation of this view, there are two common denominators in the crisis facing African states: (i) the centrality of the state which derives from the character of colonialism, and (ii) the widespread failure of state policies to achieve set objectives. The centrality of the state makes it directly involved in surplus appropriation. Its direct involvement expands its scope and makes it an arena of struggle between groups

and classes, between the centre and localities for resources. These struggles result in high antagonisms and exclusion rendering the system volatile and stormy (instability). According to them, at the onset, the colonial state played a minimal role in the produce market in colonial Africa by ensuring the primary conditions for trade. But the fall in revenues from imports and exports and the attendant economic and political instability of the depression engendered the state regulation of crop marketing and cooperatives. The success of state regulation and control of economic activities diminished confidence in the market. The emergent role of the state as the champion of development and welfare was accentuated in the post World War II period by a flourishing of *etatist* theories, specific measures of state interventions and a more general extension of state regulation of critical aspects of the economy.

As the scope of the state's activities expands, so also the demands made upon it by a variety of clients increases. But the size of the resources available to the state does not increase, nor does its capacity to mobilise revenue enlarge, yet the state embarks on development projects, which attempts to replicate the industrial revolution, but mainly in its extensive accumulation variant. Import-substitution industrialisation substitutes one form of imports for another, intensifies import dependence and makes local production depend on imported goods and materials. This has not only created problems of intersectoral linkages. It has also generated both a revenue crisis and a foreign exchange crisis.

Measures to check this decline initially involved direct control over allocation of scarce resources and a host of austerity measures. Import licences are allocated to only clients of state officials or their patrons. Commerce becomes more rewarding than organising production. Bribery and corruption become institutionalised as state officials metamorphose into businessmen, privatising state resources for their own benefit. The fall in the standard of living of majority ensures that



people occupy themselves with producing for their own needs and those of their immediate families. As public service wage earners are demoralised, moonlighting and use of public resource for private economic activities overwhelm the bureaucracy. "The outcome of the process of expanded *estatisation* is a complex crisis involving not only economic and political institutions but the culture of the society itself" (Dutkiewicz and Williams, 1987: 43). The high point of the monopolistic theory is that an approach to development is inherently problematic and its crises so huge that those who control the state are unable to handle.

The weak capacity state emphasises the inability of the state to mobilise popular commitment and support, unify contending political forces, define and implement coherent policy programmes and adjust the bureaucracy to the will of the political elite without widespread corruption and mismanagement. According to this school, especially the neo-patrimonial variant, the crisis of the state is essentially a case of institutional failure, which originates from the existence of incompatible traditional values with modern structures, a situation where state institutions are overwhelmed by particularistic and nepotistic principles. It is simply impossible for the modern state to work in Africa because of this contradiction. Indeed Hyden (1990) goes on to challenge African leaders to reconstruct the state based on peasant values of reciprocity, which, he maintains, has refused to give. Such a prescription remains curious and imaginative.

The neo-patrimonial discourse ultimately marks the triumph of Samuel Huntington since it walks us back to neo-modernization discourse involving a contrast between the 'traditional' and the 'modern'. The traditional is then perceived to produce inefficient administrative ritualism while the modern industrial produces efficient administrative rationalism and the latter is defined as the desired end (Riggs, 1957 as

stated by Brette, 1987: 6). The problem of state decay is reduced to a 'single conflict between the institutional interest of the state (governance) and the individual interests of its managers' (corruption) (Mamdani, 1992: 20). In so far as this school identifies the pattern of political relations on which appropriation is based, it is correct, but to ascribe the persistence of this debilitating pattern of appropriation to the incompatibility between values and structures is to miss the point. Most discussions within the neo-patrimonial school often recognise that African leaders were content with the structures they inherited at independence, but they fail to inquire into why this is so. The reason is that the state has served the accumulation purposes of those entrenched in the state. It was not in their interest to have it transformed.

Even so, the state in Africa has remained resilient because it is kept going by those who own it. As Clapham Christopher (1991:96–97) has noted, two reasons account for the resilience of the African state: (i) 'the commitment to the state of those who benefit from it expressed through institutions of government which they form a part. So long as the state's own hierarchy and the social groups which form it continues to hold together, it is difficult for anyone else to challenge it ...' (ii) The state is sustained through its contact with the outside world. Bureaucratic structures are imported, requiring education on an external model, by those who run them. The final resource needed to pay for it are overwhelmingly derived from taxes on the import-export economy

A point of fact, is that the African state is no more than the regulatory institution of peripheral accumulation. To abstract the state from the process of accumulation, to consider it as suspended in mid-air representing no interest at all but doing the wrong things always is to confuse rather than clarify. In this light, the weak capacity state even in its integration of the political economy approach or the use of the language of class analysis walks us back to neo-modernisation theory.



Three things are responsible for the ascendance of the weak capacity state school especially the neo-patrimonial variant: (i) the 'single-minded focus on one aspect of the historical process: that of state formation' (Mamdani, 1992: 21), (ii) the so-called absence of a national bourgeoisie (Beckman, 1988: 20) and (iii) the perceived rise of strong men (in Africa Adesina, 1995). The first occurs because state process is abstracted from the history of popular resistance. The second results from the quick dismissal of domestic ruling classes and failure to examine the extent to which they have been able to build some material base. The widespread problem of corruption, privatisation of public funds, and mismanagement emphasised particularly by Ake must be understood in the context of the development of a national bourgeoisie. As Adesina (1995:22) reminds us about the history of capitalism, the 'robber barons' of one age very frequently become the celebrated capitalists of another age. The situation in Nigeria is that the state is simply the centre of focus of the robber barons of today, the capitalist of tomorrow.

Beckman (1988) recalls how this class in Africa, has grown out of the opportunity offered by control of the state after flag independence, and the particular local and international networks of businesses which define the material conditions of these classes. He writes:

As a class, it depends on alliances with foreign capital and draws on various forms of aid and foreign state support. However, its control over political access gives it some real bargaining power vis-a.-vis foreign interests (1988: 30).

Researchers on the development of the national bourgeoisie in Nigeria for instance have placed emphasis on the impact of the indigenisation programme (particularly the second Enterprise Promotion Decree of 1977) and the impact of the rise of petroleum based foreign earnings on the class structure of the society (Paul Collins, 1977),

(Ohiorhenuan, 1989). In the former, the state provided funds to Nigerians to buy shares in transnational firms. The latter created (continues to create) opportunity by which military and civil bureaucrats transformed into capital-owning classes. Thus, apart from the state serving as the creator of the large scale domestic capital, by its position as the intermediary between domestic and foreign capital, the local bourgeoisie have been able to engage in commercial, speculative and industrial accumulation. 'They have been able to build up a remarkable material base even though still subordinated to external influence' (Mustapha 1993: 119-120 citing Olukoshi 1986). Beside the rise and fall of strong men in Africa has been linked to the interest of western monopoly finance, commercial and industrial capital including western nations and creditor institutions (Adesina, 1995: 19).

The organisational variant seems to de-emphasise the linear evolutionism of the neo-patrimonial discourse by considering state failure as the result of the inherent weakness of state organisations everywhere. But if we attempt to answer for Mars, T. 1986 (since he apparently overlooks it) the reason why this weakness becomes particularly quick and acute in Africa we return to the peculiar incongruity between modern structures and traditional values. The other option is to look at the 'process of coming to life of various social forces, of their self-consciousness and self-organisation, their vision and their capacities, their demands and their struggles to realise these' (Mamdani, *ibid*: 21). It is in this sense that the organisational variants offer some insights into the worsening crisis of the bureaucracy under neo-liberal reforms in Africa. Adjustment measures have resulted in the erosion of incentives of bureaucratic officials and workers; the strategies adopted by officials and workers to cope with these hardships have adversely impacted on state effectiveness. The victims of monetarist measures do have incentives to undermine such repressive appropriation programmes. Of course, it



must be realised that the crisis of the state had become acute before the introduction of SAP. This takes us to the consideration of the monopolistic thesis which emphasises the issue of the overloaded state. But again the proliferation of poorly coordinated monopolistic structures is only classified in the regime and linked to the opportunity opened up by the prevailing ideology of global capitalism in the post-depression years. The monopolistic thesis is however vitiated by its failure to understand the current crisis of state restructuring as the product of the contradictions of the social forces at work in Africa following the change in this hitherto dominant ideology. That is why it concludes that 'all the king's horses and all the king's men couldn't put Humpty-Dumpty together again'.

The captive state school attempts to attribute the crisis of the state to the dominance of specific social forces within the state and the negative consequences of their use of state power. The urban coalition theory became very important because its conclusions as presented by Robert Bates and taken over by the World Bank have constituted the major ideological weapon used to promote and impose monetarist measures on African states in crisis. The theory is used to diffuse the impression that African economic crisis is largely domestic so that its resolution merely requires the creating of a stable political coalition able to define and sustain policies that have general interests. On a positive note, the urban coalition theory has demonstrated that particular policies and development initiatives in general are not just technical problems but thoroughly social and political. However, it fails to take into account, the hostile and uncertain global environment, particularly the condition of unequal exchange in the international division of labour, a context in which the African state operates. Worse still, Bate's conception of an urban coalition of industrial capitalists and workers (the urban dwellers) has no empirical basis. This theory has been the subject of intense debate

between development experts and it has been rejected on both empirical and methodological grounds. The empirical critique questions the claim of heterogeneity of rural Africa and the assumption of an overwhelming rural/urban divide. It has been argued that available evidence points to a split between the poor and the rich in both rural and urban areas; that the particular form of exploitation was entrenched by the Import Substitution Industrialisation (ISI) created by a particular class configuration. Import substitution strategy was championed by western regimes, multilateral bodies and transnational capital in the 1960s and 1970s. In so far as it relates to labour, questions are also raised about the alleged excessive political muscle of workers (Adesina, 1994).

The methodological critique is on the limits and inadequacies of the new political economy of the new right and the market efficiency value that underlies it (See John Dearlove, 1987, Colin Leys, 1996, John Toye, 1991).

The comprador theory is a variant of the dependency school's critique and challenges to the development of the modernisation school and the economic determinism of classical Marxism. The salience of this theory is in its empirical characterisation of the particular nature of primitive accumulation in Africa. But it fails to analyse state failure and primitive accumulation as two sides of the same coin (Mustapha 1993: 118). Dismissing the local bourgeoisie as unproductive, it refuses to analyse the bourgeoisie's failure to exercise power and hegemony. It therefore could not capture the dialectic underlying its object of explanation. It fails to take into account 'how the manner in which the state is used to serve ruling class interests provides the focal point of opposition to the state by subordinated classes' (Beckman, 1988: 32). State process cannot be abstracted from the history of popular resistance, or the class configuration that defines its nature and role. Indeed the state is not a static phenomenon, its nature and role changes according to the



rhythm of accumulation. At a particular -conjuncture the "state may become" pervasive in order to foster the social structure of accumulation by nurturing a capitalist class and collaborating with capital to subordinate labour (Ohiorhenuan, 1989: 74). This process may include the granting of concessions to labour. At another conjuncture, the pervasive state may become due for restructure when it is perceived to have become too expensive to keep or perceived to be an obstacle to accumulation. But all processes of social transformation carry the imprint of the processes of 'coming to life of various social forces, their self-consciousness and self-organisation, their vision and their capacities, their demands and their struggles to realise these' (Mamdani, 1992.). As regards the adjustment crisis in Africa, Leys reminds us of Polanyi's famous observation that *laissez faire* taken literally was incompatible with the survival of society itself:

...there has always been a reaction against the market society doctrine making the history of capitalism a 'double movement', not a single one: the drive to expand the market and liberate it from constraints has always been countered by an effort to rein it in and resubordinate it to social needs.

Thus, any attempt to understand the African political system must move beyond the engagement with the crisis of a particular epoch to trace the contours of its evolution over time. The remaining part of this chapter attempts to map out Africa's political system in its evolution within the wider developments of the international political economy and global capitalism.

## **Historiography of the African Political System**

### ***Pre-Colonial Africa's Political System***

Pre-colonial Africa is made up of a variety of societies, identified by cultural practices, languages and forms of socio-political organisations.

These societies were independent kingdoms; emirates, empires and other decentralised lineage/clan-based organisations. The latter, a form of decentralised village self governments as we find in Igbo land in Eastern Nigeria., among the slash and burn agriculturists of northern Uganda and the pastoralist communities of Karamoja and the East African rift Valley. The kingdoms, empires and emirates were systems with centralised political authorities. The king or emir was the supreme authority with control over land. This form of rule was common in several parts of Africa. It includes the Ethiopian empire traced back to the Solomonian dynasty in central Africa., Benin Kingdom, Oyo kingdom, Sokoto Caliphate and the Asante empire of West Africa., the Buganda and Bunyoro kingdom of East Africa, and the Zulu Kingdom of Southern Africa. Some of these states emerged out of internal differentiation while a few were conquest states.

Most of these societies were largely peasant societies, made up of kin-based hereditary traditional chiefs and state-appointed administrative chiefs to implement collective goals; under a central authority headed by a king, or Emperor. In decentralised systems, there were clan and lineage based councils that made and enforce rules. Thus, pre-colonial African societies achieved, to varying degrees of success, effective resources allocation and sustainability. They achieved varying levels of modernisation. Indeed, the kinship linkages ensured that personal rights of children and the aged were respected. This resonates in what is popularly regarded as the extended family system that continues to characterise social relations in Africa.

Pre-colonial African societies were marked by forms of interaction among African societies, and with non-Africans, including Arabs and Europeans. Indeed, there were several trading posts in East, West and Southern Africa by the 17th century. Items of trade included gold, ivory and slaves. As should be expected, these series of interactions influenced



the nature of political development in Africa. A significant development was the emergence of conquest states like the Ngoni conquest in central and East Africa and the Fulani Jihad in West Africa, which subjugated peasant societies and threw up internal slaves. In fact, the early 19<sup>th</sup> century (1840-1885) saw the acceleration of political growth. These were accentuated by the emergence of militant Muslim brotherhoods and state builders. Prominent among these were the Al-hajj Umar who spear headed the Tijarniyya brotherhood and created the Tokolor Empire in the Sudan. Also of note is the Emperor Tewodros II of Ethiopia that unified and modernised Ethiopia (Tidy and Leeming, 1980).

Although African societies experienced centralised power, especially in the monarchical and conquest states, the monarchies were never absolute. There existed various forms of checks and balances that constrained the autocratic ambitions of kings. In the Buganda kingdom for example, although the king had supreme control over land, personnel that came from both humble and noble backgrounds make up the larger proportion of the administrative machinery. In fact, commoner chiefs dominated chieftaincy institutions. Clans often organised to challenge the excesses of the king. In several other societies, the idea of freedom is embodied in the right to participate in decision making through lineage representatives, secret societies, occupational guilds, associations of commoners and other groups. Some of these groups enjoy the right to remove an errant king and force him to go on exile or commit suicide as in the Ogboni society in the Yoruba states of West Africa (Mamdani 2002, Ebong 1989 Olisa, 1989, Agbaje 1989, Tidy and Leeming 1980, Deflem 1999, Smith 1976).

However, all these were greatly transformed by market driven colonialism visited on Africans by the Europeans in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Colonialism has had so great an impact on the African social and political organisations that it has created a common backcloth for an analysis of

political institutions in Africa in the postcolonial period. The colonial period is the focus of the next part of this essay.

### ***Colonial Africa's Political System.***

The nature of the colonial African political system was determined by the logic of capitalist expansion and the exploitation of African peoples and societies for this purpose. The colonial system involved the disruption of existing practices, institutions, values and political organisations to serve capitalist exploitation and domination. It involved transformation of local institutions and values into or subordination to norms, institutions and values of western capitalist societies in a perverse manner but with positive consequences for colonial exploitation (Coleman 1986; 51, Okafor 1981:31).

Mamdani (1999) characterised it as decentralised despotism, involving a form of indirect rule through the redefinition and use of local institutions hand in hand with introduced western state apparatus to establish a regime of compulsion. This regime was called forth by the need to ensure that Africans, no longer needed as slaves in plantations in the new world, were made to stay at home to produce raw materials needed to feed European manufacturing industry.

Colonialism created a state with a two tiered structure. The first tier was the native authorities or the local state that governed peasants. The native authorities were put in charge of local groups defined as tribal or ethnic groups distinct from one another. These local authorities were in turn supervised by white officials deployed from the racial pinnacle at a colonial centre. This structure transformed the power content of traditional institutions of the societies. It reinforced the powers of administrative chiefs and kings and freed it from traditional constraints of internal organisational structure and popular participation. Thus, the colonial state was essentially an unrestrained power. The native authorities were no longer responsive or responsible to the local people but to the



colonial authorities which provided them with western weapons of compulsion, the colonial police and army. Although these institutions were traditional or customary authorities, they no longer existed to fulfil the collective goal of African societies but the purpose of colonialism.

The logic of decentralised despotism is particularly evident in what has been referred to as indirect rule. Lord Lugard who was Governor of Northern Nigeria (1906-1910) and later the whole of Nigeria (1912-1914), described the process of indirect rule in this manner.

The first step is to endeavour to find a man of influence as chief, and to group under him, as many villages or districts as possible, to teach him to delegate powers, and to take an interest in his native treasury, to support his authority and to inculcate a sense of responsibility.

Such a person could be a traditional ruler (king or emir) or an influential or wealthy person who is appointed chief (in societies where no centralised authority exist) to act as a go between the colonial administration and their people. It was a form of 'relay administration in which policies originated at the top of the colonial administration and the 'traditional ruler or appointed chief' was no more than an administrative courier' (Ayoade 1995:19). However, the courier was not only a conveyor but also an enforcer, accountable only to the colonial centre from where power resides. This was the case because the values that animated the system of indirect rule were control, direction and subservience to colonial exploitation (Gboyega 1987:8). The colonial police and the army quelled popular challenges to the actions of these local authorities. The colonial powers deposed kings who dared to flout directives and installed new individuals to replace them. Clan based assemblies where issues were subject to debate, criticisms and decisions were converted into forums where decisions were merely communicated

to the people. The central colonial officer had veto power over all decisions of chiefs and their councils. Thus, the colonial state was an unrestrained state (see Mamdani, 1999).

Secondly, the colonial state was absolute, over-arching and pervasive. It had to be so in order to penetrate traditional society and redirect its 'raison d'être' from self-sufficiency and sustainability to fulfilling the needs of the colonising country. Colonial power and structures of exploitation had to be established. Hence, the state introduced administrative structures and institutions to break up traditional social relations of production. It created administrative frameworks and tax laws that transformed existing relations of production, atomised society and freed labour for public works like the building of roads, railways and ports to facilitate export of agricultural produce and the import of finished goods. It forced African farmers to produce those commodities that were needed by the manufacturing firms in Europe. The state controlled every aspect of the colonial economy, including educating Africans to provide the relevant skills in administration. The state tightly controlled and dominated these societies in order to exploit them with minimum cost to the empire (Ake, 1996).

However, due to racism, high exploitation and the arbitrary use of power, colonial rule was never widely accepted as legitimate rule. Thus, the colonial state had to rely on coercion and violence rather than authority to maintain domination. During these periods, the state was feared, avoided, abused and challenged depending on the circumstances and opportunities (Cohen 1974, Ekeh 1994). In the long run Africans began to clamour for self rule, especially after the Second World War, a period that witnessed nationalist fervent among educated Africans both within Africa and abroad. Nationalist consciousness eventually exploded into a full-fledged movement for self-determination and independence of African states in the 1950s. The activities of radical



nationalists drawn from among trade unions, students, ex-servicemen, women and urban dwellers in the form of public demonstrations, riots, strikes, boycotts and agrarian conflicts attracted, first repression and later rapid decolonisation.

However, in handing over power, the colonial office was careful to ensure that power was handed down to the conservative wings of the nationalist movements in a manner that ensured that power, as constituted by the colonial state was never transformed. The all powerful and arbitrary state was competed for in the context of the structures of colonial social relations. Clientelism, ethnicity, exclusion and fierceness that characterised politics of de-colonisation were carried over into the post-colonial era. These resulted in dictatorships and political instability in the post-colonial period.

### ***The Post-Colonial Political System.***

The post-colonial political system is best understood in the context of two developments in the political history of the world system. The first period began in 1945 with the end of the Second World War to 1989 when socialism collapsed, which is the cold war era. The second, period is marked by the ascendance of neo-liberal ideology and what Samuel Huntington has described as the third wave of democracy.

### ***The Cold War Era.***

At the dawn of independence, there was excitement and hope and a growing sense of Africanness as colonial administrators handed over power and positions in public office to Africans. Even in the euphoria of independence however, Africans faced two challenges concerning the path of development to be taken by the newly independent states. The first was question of identity and unity of Africa. For instance, what should be the organisational form and boundaries of the African states?

Should states created by the colonial powers be retained? Or should there be a reorganisation or adjustment of boundaries? Should Africa constitute a single state or should the various independent states be sovereigns within a continent-wide association of states to pursue common goals and interests? Initially, there was division between the radicals and moderates on these issues, that is, between those who want outright unification and those that preferred gradual unity beginning with a form of association of independent states. Ultimately a loose Organisation-of-African Unity (OAU) was formed without power to intervene in the internal affairs of sovereign states. The colonial boundaries were also to be maintained.

The second relates to the institutional and ideological path of development. Once the first was settled, each state adopted various forms of government and ideologies. Ghana under Nkrumah's Convention Peoples Party (CPP) adopted socialism. Tanzania under Nyerere adopted Ujamaah, a form of African socialism, and Nigeria and Ivory Coast toed the capitalist path. But the O.A.U was non-aligned, nearly all the new independent states claimed to be non-aligned. The countries adopted various institutional frameworks: Federal or unitary, presidential or parliamentary, single party or multiparty. Many of these structures did not endure. Some countries moved from one system to another. Several multiparty systems degenerated into single parties while electoral processes were abused, leading to dictatorships, as leaders sought to occupy the highest position in government for life. Military took hold of politics for over two decades in some countries with several incidences of coups and counter coups in many countries.

The cold war period was a context that provided the new African leaders alternative paths to development. It provided room for experimentation and manoeuvre in the relations among states in Africa and in their relations with the super powers and other third world



countries of Latin America and Asia as the soviet bloc and the capitalist west strove to dominate the world. The context also held opportunities concerning the strategies of control and forms of support open to African leaders in sustaining regimes locally.

At independence, it was thought that de-racialising the state by replacing the Whiteman with Africans would be sufficient to make the state to service development in Africa. In the words of Nkrumah: 'seek ye first the political kingdom and all other things will be added unto you'. Hence, the promise at independence was that the state would be used to develop African societies and thereby raise the quality of life of African peoples. Thus, the state's administration was further extended as a necessity for achieving stability to provide a conducive environment for the pursuit of development. Thus, the post-colonial state in Africa remained pervasive and overarching. As such, it became a veritable resource, the major source of wealth and social mobility in Africa. Naturally, the state as the major economic resources became an arena of struggle such that social life became over politicised. As internal struggles for power intensified, African leaders became absorbed in the effort to retain and sustain power. The framework of development was redefined as requiring values of obedience and conformity, unity of purpose and utmost discipline. Political opposition was criminalised. Single parties became the rule. Politics became even more intense and divisive. Political disorder and instability became prevalent, manifesting in the frequent occurrences of coups, corruption, violence, rigging, thuggery and ethnicity etc. as both incumbents and opposition in desperation adopted everything available to access power. The struggle for the control of the state so absorbed the energies of African rulers that development had to take a second place.

Furthermore, the state at independence was not just an instrument in the hands of the colonial powers; it was also the structural linkage of

African economies to the global capitalist systems. Africa was integrated into the capitalist system as a source of raw materials for industries in Europe, disarticulating the economies as well as subjecting them to policies and decision of the capitalist centres. Thus, the post-colonial state was also subject to neo-colonialism and imperialism, posing serious entrepreneurial leadership challenges that the rulers of Africa were ill prepared for. Therefore 'the political environment at independence was profoundly hostile to development. The struggle for power was so absorbing that everything else including development was marginalized' (Ake, 1996a:7).

As should be expected, the promise of independence was not fulfilled after two decades of self-rule. In stead, the failure of development programmes due to lack of commitment saw African countries thrown into a crisis of governance. In fact, by mid 1980s, nearly all of sub-Saharan African countries were steep in economic recession. Even the modest economic growth achieved in the first years of independence was reversed. During the period, Africa began to accumulate debts, such that the debt burden has become a major feature of Africa's underdevelopment in the new millennium This crisis that began in the 1980s spiralled into every facet of Africa's social and political institutions. Neo- liberal reform programmes adopted to arrest the growing and persisting downturn in the economy deepened distrust among the various groups and individuals competing for Africa's diminishing resources. This is because they involved a retrenchment of the state through privatisation and commercialisation (removal of subsidies and introduction of user charges, wage freezes and currency devaluation) and deregulation, which worsened social conditions and provoked public protests, riots and demonstrations. Widespread organised opposition to governments across the continent followed even as the conditions of existence became unbearable for the larger part of the populace. While



violence and civil wars eventually broke out in some countries, it led to political liberalisation in many more, as civil society organisation emerged to challenge political repression, demand respect for human rights, rule of law and multiparty democracy. These mark the beginning of the contemporary phase in the development of Africa's political system: Africa's second independence or the era of political renaissance, to use the words of Thabo Mbeki, former President of South Africa.

### *The Post cold war Era: Africa's Political Renaissance?*

Civil unrest, violent conflicts and poverty deepened all over sub-Saharan Africa in the 1990s. Democratic openings also occurred in several countries, as Africa became part of the third global democratic wave. There were returns to multiparty systems, as elections took place in several countries. Some incumbents were replaced by opposition parties. Civil society became vibrant. The genocide in Rwanda, the civil wars in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Somalia and the Sudan combined to refocus the attention of Africa's leaders to the question of security, stability and progress. With the unravelling of the arrangements put in place in the post independence period, it became clear that there is a need for a concerted effort by Africans to arrest the deepening crisis that had engulfed the continent and reversed development. This consciousness was given momentum by several successful independent regional interventions in conflict situations in different countries of Africa. This practically rendered the non-interference clause in the OAU charter unsustainable. Besides, the sub-regional intervention in internal conflicts, the new international human rights regime and humanitarian intervention processes served to put an end to the ideology of non-interference in internal conflicts. These processes were enhanced by the great transformations in the global system driven by break through in information and communications technology and the growth in

regionalisation typified by the emergence of the European Union (EU). The promise of regional integration and consciousness thus transformed the OAU into the African Union (AU) and a blue print for the overall development of Africa was developed: New Economic Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) and launched in 2001. While the NEPAD is essentially a development initiative, aimed at achieving economic development and social welfare for Africans, it has emerged within an accelerated move to achieve sub-regional economic integration in various parts of the continent (for example: Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), Southern Africa Development Co-ordination Conference (SADCC) and Common Market for East and Southern Africa (COMESA). What is more, talks on a union government for the continent have commenced. Perhaps, we should look forward to a United States of Africa. If this happen, the contours of politics and political institutions in Africa will be more neatly conceptualised from an institutional perspective.



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