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The Study of Politics and Africa

What do we know about politics in Africa after more than fifty years of research on the subject? How does the accumulated knowledge fit into the rest of the discipline of political science and especially the field of comparative politics? What, if any, are the practical implications of this knowledge for Africa's development prospects? These are the three questions that this volume addresses. It is informative and analytical as well as policy-oriented. It speaks to newcomers to the subject by providing basic data about the continent and its politics. It appeals to the more informed students of politics in Africa by analyzing and discussing key issues that feature in current research. It also invites policy analysts and practitioners to examine the issues discussed in this volume by showing how politics bears directly on development on the continent.

Africa in this volume refers to the region south of the Sahara Desert – usually called “sub-Saharan Africa.” It is a region of great cultural and geographic diversity. But with a few exceptions, like Botswana, Mauritius, and South Africa, countries in the region share the common fate of being among the poorest in the world. In the context of the current global economy, they are marginal. Various explanations have been provided for this miserable state of affairs: colonialism, traditional values, lack of capital – human as well as financial – and so on. This book takes a critical look at the character of African politics. It suggests that its still untamed nature is a significant part of the explanation of Africa's current predicament. The accumulated knowledge that political scientists have generated over the years, therefore, is of special significance for the issue of how to understand and deal with the continent's plight.

HOW POLITICAL SCIENTISTS DO THEIR SCIENCE

Making generalizations about the conditions in Africa is always hazardous. Anthropologists and historians, for example, will rightly point to the

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-03047-3 - African Politics in Comparative Perspective: Second Edition

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differences that exist in the microsocial or temporal context. Their own scholarship, focusing as it does on the peculiar and exceptional rather than on the general, offers important contributions to knowledge. It enriches our understanding of phenomena that otherwise would be only little known. Whereas they aim at a holistic understanding of a specific case, their ability to generalize from their empirically rich case study is limited. Understanding context is more important than being able to place the case in a comparative perspective. I acknowledge that local actors in Africa handle their predicament in multiple ways. In fact, the rich variety of ways in which they do it is truly fascinating.

Political scientists typically operate differently from historians and anthropologists in that they are more ready to engage in generalizations and comparisons. Because their ambition is to generalize, they often overlook the wealth of knowledge that is contained in the many case studies of specific countries or events that scholars in neighboring disciplines, such as anthropology and history, produce. This theoretical ambition may not be as high as that of economists who believe that they possess a lawlike knowledge of reality. Most political scientists are less pretentious although many are fond of trying to imitate economists. Several political scientists do, of course, become specialists: Some study only elections, others only government institutions, yet others only policy, and so forth. Knowledge generation in political science itself, therefore, tends to be fragmented. It comes in spurts, often in response to fads within the political science discipline or empirical events that attract the interest of many scholars. For instance, the demise of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War – none of which was predicted by the discipline – caused a major reorientation of scholarship toward peace and democracy. It had significant reverberations across fields in the discipline.

This book has been written because, at least for a long time, no one has tried to aggregate the knowledge that political scientists have generated about politics in Africa. More than ever, such a review is needed to demonstrate to the discipline as well as to others – not least those involved in development policy and governance – the common foundation on which political science builds its scholarship about Africa. The more specialized research that has been carried out over the years has enhanced our knowledge of specific aspects of it, but it has also tended to overemphasize some issues at the expense of others. This inevitably happens in the social sciences where theories come and go in response to specific problems or issues that members of the discipline deem important at a particular time. In order to overcome the limits inherent in specialized research and the rotation in theoretical orientation that characterizes the discipline, I have adopted a fifty-year perspective, through which I present a holistic analysis of politics in Africa that does not exist anywhere else. It brings together bits and

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pieces of important findings that are rarely fully integrated into a systematic overview. It tries to identify underlying factors that are common to African societies and economies and that determine the nature of politics in the region. It avoids putting all the blame on one or two variables, for example, clientelism, corruption, bad leadership, or ethnicity. As this volume shows, the relationships between different factors in the African situation are much more complex than the often uncausal accounts of the continent convey. The knowledge that Africanists share comes from many different streams; they flow together in a powerful, but still multifarious current that is difficult to tame or ride. Whether deemed successful or not by others, I attempt to do exactly that.

Africa's position as an area of interest in the discipline has come and gone. When I started my own career in political science in the early 1960s, Africa was the center of attention in the discipline. Thanks to systems analysis and structural functionalism, comparative politics had emerged as the essence of a new political science. The new states of Africa constituted its most prominent empirical realm. This distinction gradually disappeared, as other paradigms came to dominate, rendering comparative politics at large and African politics, in particular, much more marginal to the mainstream of the discipline. The bottom may have been in the late 1990s, when the value of area studies in American political science had reached its lowest point.

Fortunately for those interested in comparative studies, there is a growing recognition that knowledge about specific regions of the world cannot be neglected, that the study of American politics is just another area study, and that, therefore, its exceedingly privileged position in the discipline limits our understanding of what is going on, not only in other countries of the world, but in the United States itself. In short, area studies are an integral part of comparative politics, the latter an integral part of the study of American politics. Not everyone buys this thesis, but a greater number of scholars than before are ready to accept these connections today. More specifically, the study of African politics has benefited from two recent trends in the discipline. One is the growing recognition of – some would say respect for – a methodological pluralism. The other is the increasing interest not only in formal, but also in informal institutions as determinants of political choice.

Anyone studying comparative politics is aware of the continuous tension between comparability and contextuality. How does one compare a phenomenon in a distant part of the world with what is known from one's own country without losing sight of potential differences? Are there categories for analytical purposes that simultaneously do justice to African as well as American – or European – realities? As this volume demonstrates, most of us have come to acknowledge that compressing African data into preconceived boxes deduced from empirical evidence elsewhere is often

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978-1-107-03047-3 - African Politics in Comparative Perspective: Second Edition

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problematic. African realities force the honest scholars into an inevitable stretching of the discipline's more universally accepted concepts. It is easy to make the case for an African exceptionalism. This, however, is not the position I take here. African realities may be different in many respects, but they are so as a matter of degree, not kind. In this respect, Africa is no more exceptional than Asia is – or the United States, for that matter – to the rest of the comparative politics field.

This statement is not an endorsement of the position that all that counts in comparative politics are cross-sectional surveys. These have become fashionable within the field in recent years and they make their own contribution to knowledge. Relying on such type of studies, however, is never enough, whether it is the study of Africa, Asia, Europe, or the United States. As the emerging subfield of American political development indicates, even those who study the United States recognize the importance of a historical perspective on the present.

Reductionism is an integral part of the Western definition of positivist science. The question is how far the study of politics can rely on it alone. There are two issues of immediate concern: One is the nature of the data on which such studies depend. The second, what the data really capture. Comparativists need common data sets in order to be able to do their job. They seem to disagree, however, about which sets are really fundamental. New data sets keep cropping up all the time, typically justified by a redefinition of the research agenda. This is inevitable because political and social reality keeps changing. It shows the limits to relying on quantitative data analysis alone. This becomes especially true for countries around the world, including many in Africa, where national statistics are incomplete and often unreliable, where few scholars have produced their own alternative sets, and where the conditions for scientific sampling are far from ideal. The validity and reliability concerns that we all share in our research are important, but these methodological ambitions are impossible to fully realize except in those situations, for example, of decision making, where the basic premises are identical and can be held constant. These are rare in political contexts and they are usually the least interesting, because the outcome could be predicted without an elaborate formal model.

The second is what data sets really capture. Because they are a simplification of reality, they inevitably examine only what may be called the tip of the iceberg. It is inevitably partial. The cross-sectional survey, therefore, is a snapshot that leaves out a number of issues and fails to capture temporal changes. Even if some of these are controlled for in the analysis, such surveys are never anything more than one contribution of many to the answers we look for. The study of the relationship between economic development and democracy – one of the more popular themes in comparative politics – is a case in point. It has been studied on and off ever since Lipset (1959) did

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978-1-107-03047-3 - African Politics in Comparative Perspective: Second Edition

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his study more than fifty years ago. Many scholars have added their own twist to the interpretation of this issue, showing an ever-increasing number of correlations that were overlooked in Lipset's original work. This is not the place to dwell on this issue at length, only to acknowledge that what looked like a convincing correlation in the late 1950s is now much more complex and multidimensional. The conclusion that political scientists must be ready to draw, therefore, is that the more we know, the less certain we are of making predictions; the more specialized we become, the less relevant we are to the social and political issue around us. We do not accumulate knowledge in the linear fashion of physical scientists. Nor can we claim, like pioneers in medicine, that our findings or the methods we use to generate them have implications for the human body. Our research is inevitably more fragmented, but also society-oriented. It tries to rein in variation, not what is already offered to us by nature as common to all. Therefore, we are more like the pharmacologist who recognizes that there is a general recommendation for how many pills and how often patients should take them but also knows that human beings vary genetically and therefore the effects are bound to differ from one person to another. The fact that some people are better than others in remembering to take their pills adds another element of uncertainty. The reality of the pharmacologist captures best the circumstances in which students of politics try to pursue their science. It is full of yes-buts.

This book is produced in that spirit. I recognize that all knowledge in political science is partial and rests on porous ground. With this in mind, it becomes especially important that all this knowledge is occasionally brought together into a comprehensive framework for stocktaking. The frame of this book is built on as much political science research that I have been able to read and interpret, and is complemented by a range of studies from neighboring disciplines that political scientists have often cited in their own work on Africa. The frame no doubt has its holes, but I try to demonstrate what the shared knowledge is on which I base my own analysis.

WHY AFRICA MATTERS TODAY

Themes and geographical regions come and go within the field of comparative politics. Africa held center stage in the 1960s. In the 1990s Latin America had grabbed that position, because of its own transition to democracy, a theme that became popular throughout the field in recent years. The study of both economic and political reform since the 1990s has focused on the role of institutions. The new institutional economics (NIE), drawing on scholars like North (1990), has been highly influential in both economics and political science. As it has continued to permeate the two disciplines, however, it has become increasingly clear that the premises on which the

theory rests often have to be relaxed, especially in the study of economies and politics outside the more developed industrial societies. This drift has now proceeded far enough that there is a growing recognition that formal institutions do not explain everything. Much agency in both economics and politics relies on informal behavior and institutions. Agency so inspired may sometimes contradict the operations of formal institutions and contribute to increased transaction costs. But it may also have the opposite effect: reducing such costs and making organizations more effective as Helmke and Levitsky (2006), for example, show with reference to how democracy functions in Latin America.

Informal institutions, therefore, are ubiquitous. Their role can be studied in many different contexts, for example, business management, market transactions, political decision making, electoral campaigning, and bureaucratic problem solving. These institutions may have positive or negative consequences, but the important point is that scholars can really not ignore them. They constitute a new research frontier in political science and, increasingly in economics, especially among those who work with policy. For instance, frustration is growing in the international finance institutions and among bilateral donor agencies because their models do not really have much impact. They lack political traction in many countries, not the least in Africa. It is for this reason that the role of informal institutions is important also for development-policy analysts.

Africa is the best starting point for exploring the role of informal institutions that have become increasingly important around the world for at least four good reasons. One is globalization and the growing challenge it poses to states and thereby formal institutions. Another is the growing disparity between rich and poor that follows in the wake of economic liberalization of national economies. The third is postmodernism and the decline of foundationalism in favor of fundamentalism. Modernization may have had its weaknesses both as theory and development practice. We are now beginning to see the same with postmodernism. Its relativism and notion that what is right and wrong must be interpreted in a context take away the sense of right and wrong that used to prevail in policy circles. The fourth reason is the growth of global terrorism. Terrorist groups are informal institutions that threaten not only states, but also innocent citizens. Nonetheless, so are many of the responses to terrorism. For instance, fear in the United States has given rise not only to a growing importance for Christian evangelism, but also to the desire to seek security in informal institutions whether based on face-to-face or web-based reciprocities like Facebook. These institutions tell us that formal institutions are not forever and that when faced with threats to our day-to-day existence, we tend to resort to the *Kernkultur* of immediate and direct reciprocities. What so many American citizens have experienced in recent years is precisely what many people in Africa encounter daily. The

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world has become smaller in the sense that the challenges facing people in the developing world are also becoming part of the reality of people in the developed world. This has implications for political science research. No region is necessarily more important than any other when it comes to determining what research is important. Right now, with the growing interest in informal institutions, Africanists have a golden opportunity to prove their region's significance to the rest of the field of comparative politics and beyond. Political changes in North Africa and the Middle East since early 2011 have reinforced this interest.

Several factors help explain why informal institutions have been largely ignored in the past. One factor is the inclination in mainstream political science to ignore the private realm. Researchers do not have to be feminists or postmodernists to acknowledge the role power plays outside the public realm or that power relations have political implications beyond the mere social. Politics is not autonomous of society, nor is society just made of organized interests. It is in the interaction between state and society, between things public and private, that increasingly important institutional developments take place. Although those in power may have an interest in formalizing these institutions, they do not always succeed. There is certainly a significant informalization going on in every society, developed as well as developing. The process may manifest itself primarily in incidental informal behavior, such as when people pay contractors under the table to avoid paying the value-added tax to the state. Once this behavior is regularized and more than a few individuals practice it, informal institutions emerge. Individuals behaving this way respond to an unwritten rule that can be described as rational. Individuals paying their contractors under the table escape the burden of the state; the latter agree to the deal in the hope that they will get more business that way. The parties engage in morally hazardous behavior, but they take the chance because there is no outsider able to punish them. The emergence in this case of informal behavior and institutions is a manifestation of the invisible power that exists in society and helps share outcomes.

The line between institution and culture, between public and private, therefore, is much less clear-cut than our mainstream theories assume. Culture cannot be dismissed as irrelevant to political scientists because it is the foundation on which not only formal, but also informal institutions arise. The degree to which informal institutions are manifest, and thus easy to study empirically, differs from country to country, but they can never be ignored altogether. Formal institutions, although limited in their longevity, reflect culture as much as informal institutions do. Informal institutions challenge their legitimacy when a discrepancy occurs between the cultural norms guiding formal and informal institutions, as the case is when legal and moral norms may be at loggerheads. This is nowhere more apparent than in African countries. That is why there is a reason to think about

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-03047-3 - African Politics in Comparative Perspective: Second Edition

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informal behavior and institutions as a system driven by a social logic that is different from market economics or the way the modern state operates. I have referred to it as the economy of affection (Hyden 1980).

The new emphasis on informal institutions recognizes that political economy choices are socially and culturally embedded. Economy and culture are no longer two separate spheres, but analytically as well as empirically are understood as one. This interest has been empirically nurtured in recent years by changes in the global economy that exacerbate conflicts between capital and people. For instance, the many corporate scandals around the world indicate that this conflict is no longer merely between capital and labor, as understood in the orthodox Marxian political economy, but one that manifests itself in terms of strict adherence to formal rules as opposed to creative formation of informal rules that circumvent the former. This type of conflict is evident also in the contradiction between free capital and bound labor (Sassen 1998). Because movement of people across borders is strictly regulated, informal behavior and institutions develop to cope with these formal restrictions. The situation of illegal immigrants in the United States is a very striking example. The point is that this new research frontier is present in many everyday situations both in developed and developing societies. Again, though, informality is the mainstay of life in Africa. How it operates there is of both intellectual and strategic significance.

This becomes especially apparent as one turns to the link between politics and development in Africa. For several decades now, the region's development concerns have been part of the research agenda of economists, political scientists, and often also of anthropologists and geographers. This connection has helped shape the research agenda in all these disciplines partly by the policy concerns it has raised, partly because of the funding it provides. This means that what social scientists interested in Africa have done is to adjust their scholarly interests to fit the priorities expressed by the key agencies in the international development community. A brief recapitulation of how this has affected research may be in order.

It began in the 1960s with the emergence of a new field – development economics. In the perspective of these economists, development in the emerging states of what has today become the Global South would be best achieved through transfers of capital and technical expertise (Rapley 1996). This philosophy prevailed in the last days of colonial rule and in the early years of independence in Africa. Lodged in a modernization paradigm – implying that development is a move from traditional to modern society – this approach was characterized by great confidence and optimism. Although it was not reconstruction (as with the Marshall Plan in Western Europe after the Second World War) but development that was attempted in Africa, the challenge looked easy. Defined largely in technocratic terms, development was operationalized with little or no attention to context. The principal task

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was to ensure that institutions and techniques that had proved successful in modernizing the Western world could be replicated.

The second phase began in the latter part of the 1960s, when analysts and practitioners recognized that the assumption that development would trickle down from the well endowed to the poor, thus generating ripple effects, proved mistaken. Convinced that something else had to be done to reduce global poverty, the international community decided that a sector approach would be more effective. The important thing in this second phase, therefore, became how to design integrated programs that addressed the whole range of what analysts identified as basic human needs. Human capital mattered. Whereas capacity building in the first phase had been concentrated on the elite, the second phase focused on such areas as adult education and universal primary education under the assumption that these measures were integral parts of a poverty-oriented approach to development (Kuznets 1955; Adelman and Taft 1973).

At the end of the 1970s there was another shift, this time of even greater consequence than the first. It was becoming increasingly clear that governments typically could not administer the heavy development burden that had been placed on them. This was very apparent in sub-Saharan Africa, where the state lacked the technical capacity, but this was acknowledged also elsewhere because of bureaucratic shortcomings. Government agencies simply did not work very efficiently in the development field. Placing all development eggs in one basket, therefore, was being increasingly questioned as the most useful strategy. So was the role of the state in comparison with the market as an allocating mechanism of public resources (Meyer et al. 1985). As analysts went back to the drawing board, the challenge was no longer how to manage or administer development as much as it was identifying the incentives that may facilitate it.

The World Bank, mandated by its governors, took the lead on this issue and with reference to sub-Saharan Africa, the most critical region, produced a major policy document outlining the proposed necessary economic reforms (World Bank 1981). This report was to serve as the principal guide for structural adjustment in Africa in the 1980s, although the strategy was also applied in other regions of the world. These reforms, combined with parallel financial stabilization measures imposed by the International Monetary Fund, were deemed necessary to get the prices right and to free up resources controlled by the state that could be potentially better used and managed by other institutions in society – particularly the private sector. However, this period also witnessed the increase in voluntary organizations around the world and preliminary efforts to bring such organizations into the development process. With more responsibilities delegated to the market, private and voluntary organizations could play a more significant role in working with people to realize their aspirations, whether individual

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or communal (Schumacher 1973; Korten and Klauss 1985). Even though the economic reforms tended to create social inequities, the basic premise was that nongovernmental organizations could do with the people what the government had failed to do for the people.

The new thing since the 1990s has been the growing recognition that politics and development are not two separate and distinct activities. Development analysts, especially economists, had always treated development as independent of politics. Out of respect for national sovereignty, donors and governments upheld this separation for a long time. Although the new creed in the international development community is controversial in government circles in the Third World, there has been a growing recognition that getting politics right is, if not a precondition, at least a requisite of development. The implication is that conventional notions of state sovereignty are being challenged and undermined by the actions taken by the international community, both international agencies and bilateral donors. For example, human rights violations, including those that limit freedom of expression and association, are being invoked as reasons for not only criticizing governments of other countries, but also for withholding aid if no commitment to cease such violations and improvement is made. Underlying this shift toward creating a politically enabling environment is the assumption that development, after all, is the product of what people decide to do to improve their livelihoods. People, not governments (especially those run by autocrats), constitute the principal force of development. They must be given the right incentives and opportunities not only in the economic, but also in the political arena. They must have a chance to create institutions that respond to their needs and priorities. Development, therefore, is no longer a benevolent top-down exercise. Citizens have become more active in pushing for reforms (United Nations Development Programme 2010).

As long as politics and development were treated as two separate phenomena, what political scientists had to say about development was at best of secondary interest. Since the 1990s, however, this has changed. The result is that political scientists have increasingly focused their work on issues of democratization and regime transition. The question that must be raised at this point, however, is: Are we really helping to get politics right?

Working under the mantle of the international development agencies has its own costs. The agencies wish to see results quickly and they look for a blueprint for their interventions. Much of what has happened in recent years under the rubric of “good governance” reflects these problems. The main ambition has been to carry out transfer of institutions from the north to the south, based on the assumption that somehow they realign the incentive structures to foster improved forms of governance. The emphasis on strengthening civil society, free and fair elections, and more transparency