ARTICLES

Special Issue: Governance in Africa

Introduction

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What kind of entity is the State in Africa? Is it, as some would have us believe, an entity that simply needs to get better at fulfilling its functions, becoming more democratic, or becoming less corrupt? Is it an entity that would be more credible and legitimate if only it would step away from ethnic politics and become more like its western cousins? In many meetings these days, one is often asked to discuss the problems of African governance in toto, as if there is a meaningful democratisation recipe to be learnt, some counter-insurgency dynamic to be uncovered, and as if in discovering it, all will be well. But as Africanists, experience tells us that context, time, and engagement matters, and whatever the ‘problem’ is that afflicts African states, it is as much about the society that created it, and the international interlocutors who attempt to reform it, as it is about the State itself.

Given these points, trying to pin down what we mean by ‘governance’ is no mean feat. Sprinkled across policy papers and reports, the term ‘governance’ has become a ‘catch all’ to encompass the good, bad and downright ugly elements of government functioning. It certainly includes the political actors and process, but it may also encompass “democracy and representation; human rights; the rule of law; efficient and effective public management; transparency and accountability; development as an objective and a varying range of economic and political policies, programmes and institutions” (Ware 2018, 202). For international development agencies, governance might be more about what makes a country amenable to foreign capital and other forms of intervention. It also may be about the ‘C’ word: corruption.
Over recent decades, it is not hard to understand why external actors speak in worried tones about governance in Africa. There is, after all, a lot to be concerned about. ‘Big-man’ politics, authoritarian regimes, kleptocracy, term-limit extensions and electoral malfeasance all warrant attention. But so too do uprisings, forced migration, mass unemployment and ungovernable spaces. Some of these issues emanate from decisions taken by state actors, but others have come about as a result of structural adjustment policies, external intervention by foreign powers and extractionist policies brought on by the lure of natural resources.

The lens through which the ‘crisis’ of African governance is viewed needs adjustment. This adjustment is not only a matter of widening the scope of discussion about the challenges that the continent faces, but also about the response to them. It is not only about the despots and democratic leaders of Africa, but the assumptions embedded in adjustment programs from the IMF, World Bank and others who assume that templates can ‘fix’ things (Ferguson 2006). If anything is to be learned about the past few decades, it is that simple solutions to complex problems do not help. Invariably, they only make matters worse.

All too frequently, attempts to ‘reform’ governance in Africa involves the creation of an institutional casing of roles, rules and the appearance of functionality over the prevailing political logic of the country. On the surface then, it appears that learning has been achieved, institutions have been created, and the government now looks like any other. But under the surface, this assumption belies a different reality with political actors able to take advantage of such initiatives for their own interests (Byart 1989; Clapham 1996; Reno 1998; Mbembe 2001).

Mansour Khalid, the late and brilliant observer of Sudan’s turbulent history, once remarked that while the Islamist government may be the stuff of nightmares, it was wrong to ascribe to it some kind of independent birthright outside of “the polluted womb of Sudanese politics” (Khalid 2003, 199). This observation leads one to ask: what is it in the patterning of social relations in Africa that gives birth to the political dynamics we are seeing at the top? It also raises the question: what is it in Africa’s relations with others that is contributing to the pollution of the political sphere and its functioning?

The stuff of nightmares can indeed be found in the colonial history of Africa, the expropriation of land and resources, and the violence meted out by foreigners in pursuit of riches. It can be found in the practices of inclusion and exclusion—the intelligence reports, and forms of control—where some Africans were educated and given office to perpetuate the role of the colonisers, while others were relegated to closed districts. But
the seeds of the current situation can also be found in the vastness of Africa and in those who, on the periphery of state-society relations, then questioned why in a territory that purported to be one country, there were also vast differences in the ways people were treated. Given the size of the continent, it is little wonder that those excluded turned to their clan groupings and ‘tribes’ for answers to their problems.

The state of the State in Africa, and the governance mechanisms it uses, are perhaps not that surprising when viewed in this light. Neither are the uprisings, the forms of ‘tribalism’ on display, the patronage networks that disperse goods to ethnic groups and followers, or the religious movements that offer ‘salvation’ from these issues. What is surprising in contemporary Africa is the idea that generic forms of western governance and economic policy might provide the solution to reform these problems. Such approaches ignore the political logics that have emerged over time, as well as the idea that African states have more than a little utility to certain domestic and international actors.

Going forward, the most important issue facing the State in Africa, is not to try to change its form, but rather the dynamics that make it an object of capture. Of course, a significant part of the story here is access to economic capital in the form of loans, concessional aid or extractive resources which can be privatised for individual or group gain. But the lesser acknowledged part of the story is the history of structural adjustment into which governance was later inserted (more as an afterthought than anything else), and the international regulatory system that pushes extractives as a solution to a failing economy and escalating levels of debt. All of these issues have reduced the capacity of the state by either conducting an end around it, creating strictures that make service provision extremely difficult, or bypassing normal economic development to engage in ‘quick money’ extractive economies instead. Donors who step into the breach of service provision think in short-term project cycles, often duplicating services to create overflow in some areas and large gaps in others.

Once the state becomes the object of capture, capabilities go by the wayside in favour of familial lineage and who one knows. Similarly, getting one’s ethnic group into power and keeping them there becomes a priority, since it is only by keeping and developing a shadow state (Reno 1998) that it becomes possible to hold onto money and power. This in turn feeds election violence and uprisings either to get a piece of the pie or, to use African terminology, to stop someone else ‘eating’ it. Peace talks frequently address first the thing that needs to be talked about last (i.e., wealth and power sharing), which privileges armed actors over the
population and long-term societal transformation. In this situation, the ubiquitous issue of identity (read, negative identification as a rationale for discrimination) becomes something worth fighting and dying for.

Under such circumstances, talk of democracy and legitimacy is challenging. Are we talking about rule by the people, or rule by an elected few on behalf of the people? If those people are ruling on behalf of, exactly whose needs are served in a situation of state capture and kleptocracy? Where legitimacy is concerned, is it concerned with family lineage, with holding office after securing an election, or perhaps with a semblance of legitimacy based on dissimulation? (Wedeen 1999). If the latter, where does politics go and how does opposition survive? Should we jettison the normative questions of democracy in favour of Popper’s formulation that the state should be “constituted so that bad rulers can be got rid of without bloodshed, without violence?” (Popper 1988, 20). If so, and in the face of recent history, what process and exactly who, will call ‘time’ on such rulers?

In the essays that follow, many of these issues are examined. Looking at specific examples from Zimbabwe, Zambia, Uganda, Sudan and from Africa in wider perspective, we dig beneath the surface of conventional politics to question the logics of governance. In the first essay, Ernest Mensah Akumah asks about the progress of democracy across the African continent. Drawing on public opinion surveys and secondary sources, he interrogates whether Africans favour democracy. Finding that they do, he looks at points of consolidation and weakness. Acknowledging that the continent is riddled with a myriad of challenges, ranging from ‘big-man’ politics and weak or ineffective institutions, to corruption and election violence, he emphasises the need for meaningful democratic processes that go beyond strengthening political institutions to include securing socio-economic rights and ensuring active citizens’ engagement in the political system.

Following from here, Geoffrey Hawker turns to electoral malpractice in post-Mugabe Zimbabwe. Centring his analysis on the under-recognised problem of malapportionment in electoral constituencies, he notes that while this aspect of the electoral process is cloaked in the language of democracy, its potential to bring about the precise opposite is very real. While the issue is well known in Zimbabwe, Hawker contends that it has received little attention in scholarly literature. Analysing the 2018 elections, Hawker contends that malapportionment has become a significant issue, where ZANU-PF candidates managed to win seats despite having, on average, far fewer votes to win a seat than other candidates. This raises the question of delimitation and the role of the
Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC), which, through lack of action, has enabled this situation to continue.

Anne Bartlett looks at the deep state in Sudan and the challenges of dismantling it in the wake of the 2019 revolution. She argues that while discussions about the deep state have become synonymous with kleptocracy and violence, a more fine-grained analysis is in fact needed to understand how it installed itself and continues to influence the government. This means going further than understanding corruption and theft alone. It needs an analysis of the ideologies, intelligence agencies, media centres, communication networks, operatives and outside lobbyists who facilitate a discursive regime that changes the very nature of what counts for truth. It also means a deeper understanding of the different forms of capital which provide legitimacy within the country and without. Following from this, she argues that change must go further than asset seizure and tracking of illicit financial flows alone—it must encompass a more fundamental and difficult transformation of systems of privilege, education, and connection that are at the heart of Sudan’s core-periphery relations.

James Dhizaala brings us to Uganda and the struggle to assert a credible opposition politics which is capable of bringing substantive change. Tracing the ways in which President Museveni has manipulated the political system, he argues that the concentration of power in one man has led to a situation where political space has now atrophied. In particular, the abolition of term and age limits has made Uganda less democratic and more amenable to authoritarian tendencies. This has, in turn, reduced opposition to something that can only operate through casual channels as a form of pop-up politics. The net result of this situation is that credible, open, institutional political organisations capable of building solid coalitions, is no longer possible in Uganda. Those who stand to oppose the president do so from the shadows—as a form of oppositional populist politics—knowing what they oppose but being unable to develop strong platforms that can ultimately bring change.

After Uganda, we turn to Zambia and the challenge of election monitoring. Highlighting the difference between the perception and reality of democracy in the country, Margaret O’Callaghan reminds us that observer missions should not only see something but say something. Taking us through the 2016 elections and their aftermath, O’Callaghan documents the rise of violent repression and human rights abuses leading to the conclusion that Zambia is moving ever closer to an authoritarian form of governance. As she points out, far from making strong
representations about election irregularities, observers gave wildly differing accounts of what had transpired during the elections, leading to questions about whether they had even been observing the same thing. Questioning what can be done, she concludes that quiet diplomacy may have some effect, but financial leverage may be more effective in preventing future appeals from falling on deaf ears.

Finally, we turn to West Africa through the work of Muhammad Dan Suleiman. In his piece, Suleiman argues that rebel movements are not events but, in fact, processes that are premised on contextual factors. Examining the rise of jihadist groups such as Al-Shabaab, Boko Haram, and Jamā’at Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen (JNIM), he shows how grievances, networks, legitimating ideologies and local contexts shape the growth of political extremism. Stressing the processual dimensions of their emergence, he suggests that west African countries might be categorised as ‘those experiencing political extremism’ and ‘those yet to do so’. He concludes by arguing that current socio-political structures and processes, even in countries currently not experiencing extremist groups, may set countries on the road to producing extremist groups in the future.

References