

Third Edition

# An Introduction to African Politics

Alex Thomson



ROUTLEDGE

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## ■ AN INTRODUCTION TO AFRICAN POLITICS

The third edition of *An Introduction to African Politics* continues to be an ideal textbook for those new to the study of this fascinating continent. It gets to the heart of the politics of this part of the world, tackling questions such as: How is modern Africa still influenced by its colonial past? How do strong ethnic identities on the continent affect government? Who has the military been so influential? Why do African states have such difficulty managing their economies? How does African democracy differ from democracy in the West?

The result is a textbook that identifies the essential features of African politics, allowing students to grasp the recurring political patterns that have dominated this continent since independence.

Features and benefits of the third edition:

- Thematically organised, with individual chapters exploring issues such as colonialism, ethnicity, nationalism, religion, social class, ideology, legitimacy, authority, sovereignty and democracy.
- Identifies key recurrent themes such as the competitive relationships between the African state, its civil society and external interests.
- Contains useful boxed case studies at the end of each chapter, including: Kenya, Tanzania, Nigeria, Botswana, Côte d'Ivoire, Uganda, Somalia, Ghana, Democratic Republic of the Congo and Zimbabwe.
- Each chapter concludes with key terms and definitions, as well as questions and advice on further reading.
- Illustrated throughout, with images of important political figures, and key moments in African history.
- Important terms and concepts are explained in a clear and accessible manner and supported by contemporary examples.

This expanded, fully revised and updated edition remains the ideal gateway for students seeking to make sense of the dynamic and diverse political systems that are a feature of this fascinating part of the world.

Alex Thomson is a Principal Lecturer in Politics at Chesham University. His books include *Constructive Engagement: US Foreign Policy Towards South Africa, 1981-1986* (Avebury, 1996), *Get Set for Politics* (with Keith Faries and Ken Phillips, Edinburgh University Press, 2006), and *U.S. Foreign Policy Towards Apartheid South Africa, 1948-1994: Conflict of Interest* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).



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Alex Thomson

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## PREFACE TO THE THIRD EDITION

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Once again, an overhaul of *An Introduction to African Politics* is required to keep up with events on the continent. Since 2004, and the publication of the second edition of this book, there have been significant gains and setbacks for Africa, political and economic development.

On the positive side, a majority of African states have experienced economic growth during the first decade of the twenty-first century. Admittedly, improved economic indicators are being measured against the nadir of the 1980s and 1990s, but nevertheless, in a majority of cases, African economies are expanding. For the poorest African states, the loosening of the external debt crisis that stifled the continent's finances for so long has helped this situation. International agreement reached at Glencrag in 2005 is to be welcomed. Should the G8 nations continue to offer debt relief and assist poverty alleviation, as promised, then this could make a sizeable contribution to Africa's economic fate. Given the continent's continued precarious position in the international economy, this change of policy is essential.

In terms of political developments, a positive gain is the degree of democratic consolidation experienced over the last decade. The danger was that the wave of multi-party elections documented in earlier editions of this book was just a one-off event required to re-legitimise the state. Competitive polls have, however, continued. Although far from being universal and unproblematic, significant regime change is occurring in Africa as a consequence of citizens voting. The electoral authoritarianism experienced, today, is a marked improvement on the predatory state prevalent for most of the post-colonial period.

The downside, however, is that it seems that few states are immune from democratic reversal. Once relatively powerful and reasonably representative states, such as Côte d'Ivoire and Uganda, have reversed back to authoritarian ways. Similarly, Kenya has also lost its way. The 2007 elections in this state were seemingly regarded by political parties as just a starting point for negotiations, rather than definitively deciding who should govern. Continent-wide, things are definitely better than in the past, but the path of democratic consolidation is still very uneven and uncertain. The cases of Somalia and the Democratic Republic of the Congo still shine as beacons reminding Africans of what can happen if legitimacy cannot be restored.

I have updated, where necessary, the third edition of this book to reflect the developments mentioned above. I have added new sections to the 'democracy' chapter, for example, and used Zimbabwe as a case study to reflect contemporary

trends. Likewise, I have re-written the political economy chapter, 'Sovereignty II', to reflect what the G8 ministers have promised (and ignored) regarding debt relief and aid.

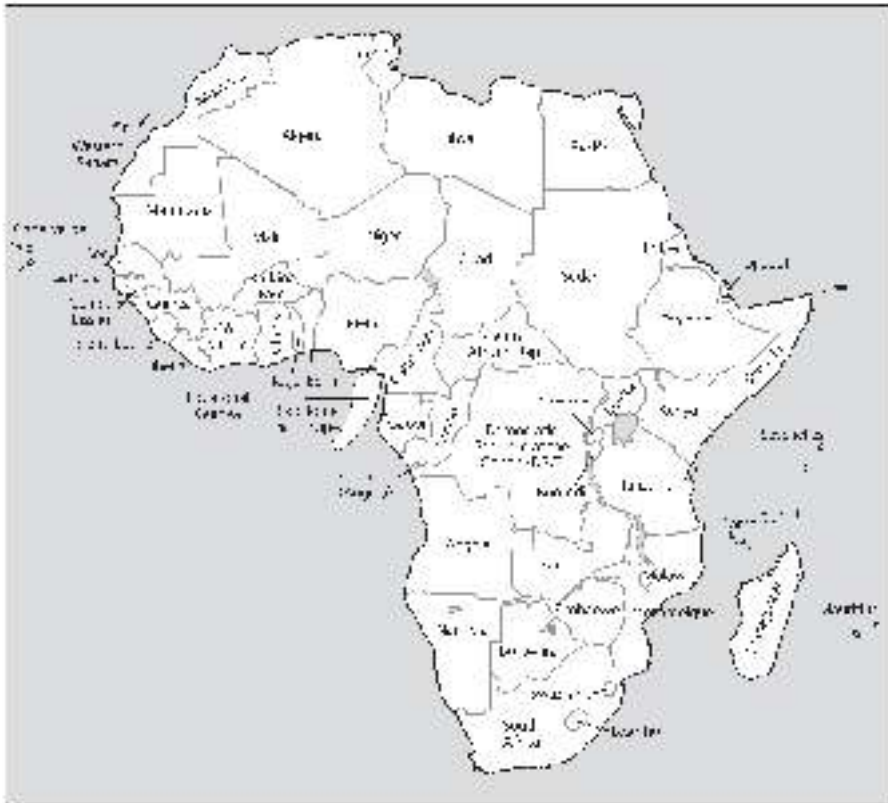
There have also been significant developments in the international relations of the continent in recent times. The third edition makes an early assessment of the performance of the African Union and the New Partnership for Africa's Development, and charts Britain's continued erratic Africa policy. It is China's massive presence on the continent, however, that has been the biggest change to Africa's international affairs. A re-writing of the 'Sovereignty I' chapter has been undertaken to emphasise these new factors.

I hope that the amendments mentioned above, and others, have kept the original work up to date and relevant, assisting students and other readers to make sense of the politics of this fascinating continent. I also hope that you gain as much learning and enjoyment from reading this book as I did through writing it.

My thanks go to my colleagues Alexander Kazianka and Simon Massey for their scholarly input, and to Janice Ellis and Pat Thomson for their continued, and no less scholarly, proofreading assistance. Much obliged.

A.R.L.  
 Manchester, April 2011

## AFRICA TODAY



Africa today





# Introduction

## *State, civil society and external interests*

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Africa has a lot to offer the student of political. 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 collapse; multi-party 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 subject to study.

### WHY STUDY AFRICAN POLITICS?

Yet, it could be asked, why should Westerners spend valuable time analysing the politics of Africa? Should they not concentrate on countries closer to home? Indeed, what is it precisely that this continent has to offer? Well, apart from the reward of

investigating Africa's fascinating political nuances for their own sake, the continent is also invaluable for the study of comparative politics. Africa's variety of political ideas, processes and institutions provide an abundance of alternative case studies for the student of politics to investigate. After all, studying political phenomena outside familiar (Western) settings can add a new dimension of understanding. As many travellers have learnt, experiencing foreign cultures not only helps with an appreciation of the country visited, it also forces the traveller to view their own country in a different light. The method of comparative politics has a similar aim.

However, to benefit from what Africa has to offer, new scholars of this continent first need to abandon unhelpful preconceptions. Average Western views of Africa tend to be rather selective and not always accurate. The most common exposure the continent receives in the West is via broadcast journalism, and if individuals rely solely on this source, their Africa is a continent of corruption, famine, disasters and civil war. All these factors do exist on the continent from time to time, but to see such phenomena as the sum of African politics is to be profoundly misled. Media selectivity and ignorance based on the images of famine, mud huts and warring tribes all have to be left behind before the real essence of Africa can be grasped. Newcomers to the continent should approach this part of the world with an open mind.

George Alagiah, a former African correspondent for the BBC, highlights the problem of perception. Assessing his stint on the continent, he was well aware of the 'bad press' that this part of the world received during his watch. Despite his efforts to inform, he conceded, 'In Western television pictures painted Africa as a fantasy place where good people go hungry, bad people run government, and chaos and anarchy are the norm'. He regretted that rarely do viewers get to see Africa 'in full flower'. Illustrating this point, Alagiah recounts an instance towards the end of his stint. While covering a famine in southern Sudan, he filed two reports. These were broadcast on the BBC's national news on consecutive nights. The first described the situation on the ground, and the second made a conscious effort to explain why the famine had occurred. It was the first film that had most impact. Letters from viewers reflected people's feeling of genuine sorrow for the poor souls of southern Sudan, but few recalled being told why this tragedy had actually happened. As Alagiah puts it, 'To get people in British living rooms to identify with the frazzled aid worker as she cries to cope with a humanitarian disaster is easy. To get people to see that the crisis is part of the convulsive process of post-colonial political realignment is more difficult.'<sup>1</sup>

This is precisely the problem that new students of Africa have to overcome. The difficulty is that many Westerners, when it comes to African politics, simply see cause and effect as the same thing. Why is there a civil war in the Democratic Republic of Congo? Why was there genocide in Rwanda? Why has the Somali state collapsed? All these questions are satisfactorily dealt with in people's minds by the answer 'because these countries are in Africa'; these things happen 'naturally' or 'inevitably'; it is an inherently unstable region. This is the central myth that *An Introduction to African Politics* aims to destroy.

Africans are innately no more violent, no more corrupt, no more greedy, and no more stupid than any other human beings that populate the planet. They are no less capable of governing themselves. Not to believe this is to revive the racism that

undermined the crisis of slavery and colonialism. In this sense, African political structures are as national as are other systems of government. If there have been more military coups in Africa than in the United States, even there has to be a reason for this. An explanation also exists for why the continent's political systems are more susceptible to corruption than those of the United Kingdom. By applying reason, the worst excesses of African politics (the dictators and the civil wars) can be accounted for, as can the more common, more mundane, day-to-day features of political life on the continent. This book uncovers the genuine underlying post-colonial political processes that have been at work, and, as such, asks its readers to abandon any preconceived explanations they may harbour which involve Africans being seen as inferior, irrational, victim or artless victims of their own political environment.

## THE MULTIPLE POLITICAL SYSTEMS OF AFRICA

A second preliminary piece of advice that this book offers is for newcomers not to regard Africa as homogeneous. It is an extensive landmass, home to many different cultures and societies. There is no such thing as a typical African polity. There are 53 separate independent states, each is unique, and each has its own system of politics. The Gambia is a tiny country of just 11,000 square kilometres, while the Sudan's territory is 250 times larger than this; Nigeria has a population approaching 130 million, while Lesotho has just two million inhabitants; Botswana is largely an arid state, but Congo-Kinshasa is lush in vegetation; Ethiopia is racially homogeneous, while South Africa is home to several 'races'. The north of the continent is predominantly Muslim and the south Christian, not to mention the mix of indigenous spiritual traditions found throughout. No single political system would be capable of serving all these states, as local demands necessarily produce different and individual policies.

To cope with this diversity, there is certainly no substitute for studying every African country on its own terms. Each state deserves to be examined in as much detail as possible. A vast literature on the politics of the continent exists in an attempt to do just this. Yet experienced Africanists often find it difficult to digest this detailed and sometimes complex body of work without investing first in some more general preparatory reading. The present book was written with this fact in mind. It is a stepping stone to the more specialised literature.

An *Introduction to African Politics* offers a comparative approach to the whole of Africa. The book will make general sweep across the continent, identifying common elements within these societies. The grounding that such an approach gives with respect to the basics – the key principles – of African politics, makes up for what is lost in the detail by this 'broad' survey. It allows newcomers to ease themselves into the politics of the continent, identifying the essentials, rather than grappling with the minute detail found in the literature addressing individual states. The book thus acts as a starting point for those interested in the politics of post-colonial Africa.

## THE BOOK'S THEMATIC APPROACH

Having established that the politics of Africa are minimal and worthy of study, and that the continent is not homogeneous, it would be wise now to outline the book's methodology. As indicated earlier, the practice of politics on the African continent is not all that different from political processes found elsewhere in the world. Issues of power, ideas, resource distribution, and conflict resolution, as well as the governmental structures that oversee these processes. In this sense, Africa may be a unique stage on which political transactions are unfixed, but the actual processes themselves have more similarities than differences with other continents. Note, for example, how ideology (the Soviet Union, for instance), issues of ethnicity and class (Belgium and Britain, respectively), military *coups d'état* (Portugal), state collapse (Yugoslavia), newly formed democracies (Spain) and one-party states (East Germany) have all been features within European politics during the same post-colonial period and a century.

In this respect, new scholars to African politics should not be unduly daunted. The knowledge readers already have of (Western) political processes and concepts can be readily applied to the African continent.

And this, indeed, is how the book will be structured. Each chapter takes a familiar political concept, and then examines how this concept relates specifically to the African environment. Chapters tackle issues such as ideology, nationalism, social class, legitimacy, coercion, sovereignty, authority and democracy among others. How has each of these concepts influenced the politics of post-colonial Africa? Not only does this thematic approach introduce the nature of the African polity, giving knowledge of what has actually happened since independence, it also helps students reinforce their understanding of these important basic political concepts.

In addition to the main discussion of the chosen concept in each chapter, throughout the book descending into a morass of theoretical assumptions and continent-wide generalisations, a short case study is provided at the end of each chapter focusing on just one state. The ideology chapter, for example, concludes with a boxed case study on Tanzania's implementation of community socialism under Julius Nyerere's presidency, while the democracy chapter focuses on Zimbabwe's struggle with multi-party politics. These 10 case studies provide a practical demonstration of how abstract political concepts help to explain the reality of African politics on the ground.

## STATE, CIVIL SOCIETY AND EXTERNAL INTERESTS

As this book deconstructs the 'whole' of African politics chapter by chapter, dividing it into various thematic components, state and case studies, there is a need to provide some conceptual 'glue' to help the reader reassemble all the separate parts. This glue comes in the form of a political relationship between three actors: the state, civil society and external interests. Each event in the path of Africa's political development since independence can be traced back to a realignment of power amongst these three groups. As such, a commentary will run through all the chapters examining this relationship.

Given that state, civil society and external interests are to be recurring themes of the book, it is worth spending the rest of this introduction briefly discussing these terms. The state should be a familiar concept to us all. A minimal definition would identify *a set of political institutions that govern within a delimited sovereign territory*. But a modern state cannot be seen just as a geographic entity and a body of institutions. A more useful definition of the state has to take into account the political authority that these structures generate. After all, it is to the institutions and officials of the state that citizens look for leadership and governance, as well as being the *sovereign body* that foreign states interact with. In this respect, the state has immense power. Max Weber, in his definition of the state, pointed to the fact that deference of citizens is generated by the reality that the state claims a monopoly of legal violence within a territory.<sup>1</sup> Given that the state is the only authority able to establish and uphold a society's laws, it starts from a position of strength, and clearly has a commanding influence over a territory's political development.

This is not to say that all politics happens as 'high politics' within the state. Conflict resolution is not confined to competition within parliaments, presidential elections and by-elections. Political (and indeed, economic and social) exchange can be found throughout society at a 'deeper' level than that of the state. This is why the idea of *civil society* is so important to explaining African politics.

In the context of this book, civil society can be defined as *the organisations that arise out of voluntary association within society, found between the extended family and the state*. Examples of these include professional organisations, labour unions, trade associations, women's groups, church assemblies, businesses, special interest campaigns, community groups, and so on, right down to sports and social clubs. In this respect, any group organised beyond the family, but not part of the state apparatus, can be defined as part of civil society.

Political activity within civil society is diverse. Groups representing numerous different interests naturally enough are not unified in their demands. Politics within civil society is competitive, just as it is in the 'high politics' of the state. These different interests also influence how civic associations relate to the state. Some groups will cooperate with the government, others will voice their opposition. In any case, each group will attempt to influence state decision-making, with varying results. If, however, a large gap develops between the interests of civil society and the state, with the state unresponsive to civil society demands, this may lead to citizens actually challenging the authority of the state.

The third party within this competitive relationship is that of 'external interests'. African countries are identical to others around the world in that their fates are not decided totally within the domestic political arena. International relations are also influential. Historical and economic factors have conspired to ensure that the states of Africa are influenced by external events perhaps even more than their neighbours on other continents. Indeed, many Africanists have cited imperialism and 'neo-colonialism' as the major governing force behind Africa's poor economic and political performance. This is a debate taken up in the main text of this book, but whether they have had a negative or positive impact, there is no denying that foreign governments, international organisations and transnational corporations have played a major part in Africa's neo-colonial political development.

*An Introduction to African Politics*, in addition to applying analytical 'frames' to the continent's politics, is about exploring the contradictions between the above three actors. On the whole, it is a story of how states, civil societies and external interests have failed one another. The state, starved of resources (partially due to the influence of external interests), became somewhat invigorated after independence, excluding civil society from the political process. This resulted in the unequal representation of African citizens by their governments. Indeed, it was often the case that state actors deliberately muddled their public duties and their private interests. Consequently, most services or resources passed down to ordinary citizens were channelled through inefficient, patronage networks. Civil society, for its part, never really engaged the state. Where it was possible, and advantageous to do so, citizens bypassed state authority. Taxes were not paid, for example, and crops not sold to state marketing boards. In many instances, this avoidance became a survival strategy of necessity against a predatory state. Consequently, state and civil society drifted apart during the first few decades of African independence.

All, however, is not lost. A wave of multi-party elections swept the continent from the late 1980s onwards, and initiated a process whereby state and civil society have still, a more profitable relationship in recent times. This relationship feels somewhat short of Western democratic norms, and is far removed from Weber's model state, where politicians and bureaucrats clearly separate their private and public interests, and the 'national good' is served through neutral legal-rational institutions, but a new relationship has been brokered nonetheless. The question remains, however, whether this re-established balance of state, civil society and external interests will perform better than in the past. Post-colonial Africa has experienced long periods of poor or no economic development alongside limited political representation. Will this new, more democratic, political dispensation change things for the better?

The above analysis, however, is getting ahead of itself. Readers new to the continent first need a grounding in the fundamental building blocks of post-colonial African politics, starting with such commentary on state, civil society and external interests. The latter makes more sense after a discussion of the former. It is thus time to turn to the core text of this book where basic thematic concepts and case studies are presented chapter by chapter. In this manner the intricate mechanisms that drive African politics will be revealed.

## GLOSSARY OF KEY TERMS

- Civil society** – The organisations that arise out of voluntary association within society, fitted between the extended family and the state.
- External interests** – Foreign governments, international organisations and transnational corporations that interact with African states and civil associations.
- The state** – A set of political institutions that govern within a delimited sovereign territory.

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**NOTES AND REFERENCES**

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