Why African Governance Has Struggled

AiCE Africanism & Pan-African Studies — Colonial inheritance, Big Man politics, ethnicity

The Colonial Inheritance: States Built for Extraction, Not Service

African governance failures cannot be understood without understanding what African states inherited at independence. The colonial state, examined earlier in this course, was designed not to govern but to extract — to channel resources from African communities to the metropolitan economy with maximum efficiency and minimum cost. It was staffed by European administrators accountable to distant colonial capitals, not to the African populations they governed. It used coercion rather than consent as its primary mechanism of compliance. It deliberately prevented the development of African administrative capacity, because competent African administrators were a threat to colonial control.

The states that emerged from colonialism inherited this apparatus: bureaucracies designed for extraction, security forces designed for suppression, legal systems designed for control, and borders that bore no relationship to the political communities they enclosed. The new African leaders were expected to transform these instruments of colonial control into instruments of development and democratic governance — overnight, without the resources, the trained personnel, or the institutional traditions such a transformation would require. The wonder is not that so many African states have struggled with governance. The wonder is that any have succeeded.

But structural inheritance is not destiny. South Korea and Taiwan inherited colonial states designed by Japan for extraction. Singapore inherited a colonial apparatus built by Britain. All three built governance systems of remarkable effectiveness within a generation of independence. The structural challenge is real, but it does not determine outcomes. What determines outcomes are the choices leaders and citizens make about what to build.

The Big Man Problem: Personalised Power and Its Consequences

The single most destructive governance pathology in post-colonial Africa has been the concentration of power in a single individual — the 'Big Man' phenomenon, as Africanist scholars have called it. Across dozens of African states, the formal constitutional structures of democratic governance — parliaments, judiciaries, constitutional limits on executive power — have been hollowed out by leaders who accumulated personal power at the expense of institutions, who used state resources for personal and ethnic enrichment, and who extended their tenures through constitutional manipulation, electoral fraud, or outright repression.

The list of such leaders is long and painful: Mobutu Sese Seko of the Congo (32 years), Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe (37 years), Muammar Gaddafi of Libya (42 years), Omar al-Bashir of Sudan (30 years), Paul Biya of Cameroon (still in power after 40+ years), Teodoro Obiang Nguema of Equatorial Guinea (still in power after 40+ years). These leaders did not begin as dictators in every case. Several — Mugabe most notably — began as genuine liberation heroes with genuine popular support. What transformed them was the absence of institutional constraints that could check their power, the culture of deference that made challenging them personally dangerous, and the external support — from Western powers, from China, from the IMF — that prioritised stability over accountability.

> *"The problem is not that Africans are uniquely susceptible to the temptations of power. The problem is that too many African states have not yet built the institutional cages that keep power accountable. Every human being given unchecked power tends toward abuse. The question is always: what constrains the power? In too many African states, the answer has been: not enough."*
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> **— Adesina Olagunju, Founder, AiCE**

Ethnicity and Governance: The Politics of Identity

Africa's colonial borders, as established earlier in this course, created artificial states enclosing multiple ethnic groups with no prior history of shared political identity. The politics of ethnicity — the mobilisation of ethnic identity for political purposes — has

been one of the most persistent and most destructive features of African political life. When political competition becomes primarily ethnic competition — when voters choose candidates based on ethnic loyalty rather than policy positions, when governments distribute resources to their own ethnic constituency rather than to all citizens — the result is chronic political instability, governance failure, and in the worst cases, ethnic violence.

But the relationship between ethnicity and governance failure is not straightforward. Tanzania — with over 120 ethnic groups — has maintained remarkable political stability precisely because Julius Nyerere's deliberate cultivation of Swahili as a national language and identity gave Tanzanians a non-ethnic basis for political solidarity. Botswana has multiple ethnic groups but has built political institutions that transcend ethnic competition. The problem is not ethnic diversity per se — diverse societies can be well-governed — but the politicisation of ethnicity in contexts where institutions are too weak to manage it constructively.

Key Takeaways

African governance struggles have identifiable structural causes: colonial states built for extraction rather than service, the Big Man problem of unchecked personal power, and the politicisation of ethnicity in artificial states — but none of these causes make governance failure inevitable, as South Korea, Taiwan, Tanzania, and Botswana each demonstrate in different ways. The next lesson examines the most serious recent manifestation of these structural weaknesses: Africa's 2020-2024 coup wave.