



Governance

Governance in Africa

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Last updated 18 December 2024 using IFs v7.84

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Governance in Africa

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Briefly

This section summarises the history and impact of Africa's imposed state formation process.

Beginnings

Africa experienced a unique trajectory in the evolution of governance. The fixed territorial state with a single jurisdiction and government, then already well established elsewhere, was essentially a late colonial imposition on the continent during the 19th and 20th centuries.

Whereas in Asia and Europe, the process of territorial state formation was shaped by conflict over resources, land, animals, slaves and trade, the African experience for thousands of years was that of shifting tribes that moved seasonally with their animals, providing a more fluid progression. Socially, many of sub-Saharan Africa's societies came to be characterised by an age-grade system that established male gerontocracy as the dominant form of political organisation, still evident in numerous countries today.^[1]

For centuries, even before the large south- and eastward drift of the Bantu-speaking people from West Africa, sub-Saharan Africa's general low population density meant tribal wars were not fought over land but over labour — to capture slaves. Enrichment and social elevation depended on the possibility of large herds and cultivating a maximum surface area; hence the interest of heads of families to have a large workforce. The more slaves and women a man owned, the more land he could cultivate and the richer he was. Only ancient Egypt, later the Ethiopian highlands around Aksum (or Axum), and development along the Niger river in West Africa would buck this general trend.

Africa's high disease burden also meant that military innovations, often the driver of progress, such as the war horse, chariots, widespread use of bronze and later, weapons made from iron, were not required.^[2] Conflicts in Africa were small-scale compared to what was happening in Europe and Asia. And they were not required for survival among early African societies that traditionally lived in relatively small groups scattered across large distances, eking out an existence in harsh environments. In the words of John Reader, 'like everything else in human evolutionary history, small peaceful communities in Africa were an ecological expedience; ensuring survival in a hostile environment of impoverished soils, fickle climate, hordes of pests, and a more numerous variety of disease-bearing parasites than anywhere else on earth.'^[3]

In time, sub-Saharan Africa changed socially and politically, although more slowly than other regions, with large, relatively complex social formations evolving and succeeding one another in the Sahelian region of West Africa and elsewhere, but never rivalling the density and size of cities and most emerging states outside of Africa.^[4]

Impact of slavery, colonialism and the Cold War

From the early seventh century, the Arab and, from the 15th century, the transatlantic slave trades had a particularly destructive effect on Africa's governance and development. During the Arab [slave trade](#) between 11 million to 17 million Africans were transported, mostly across the Sahara desert, from sub-Saharan Africa to North Africa for onward sale. A further 12.5 million men, women and children were captured and shipped to North America in exchange for imported goods that brought wealth and power to a small group of traders, chiefs and kings at the expense of immeasurable suffering. Many more [Africans](#) died in the process. As a result of slavery, sub-Saharan Africa's population stagnated in absolute numbers, as did progress towards greater security, capacity and inclusion.^[5]

Ironically, the demand for slaves was legitimised in the eyes of many African traders and leaders by widespread domestic slavery and forced labour practices.

Constantly denuded of sufficient, productive human capital, parts of West and Central Africa were almost in perpetual turmoil, and development here took a different route to that in Europe and Asia until the imposition of rigid colonial borders established nominal order.

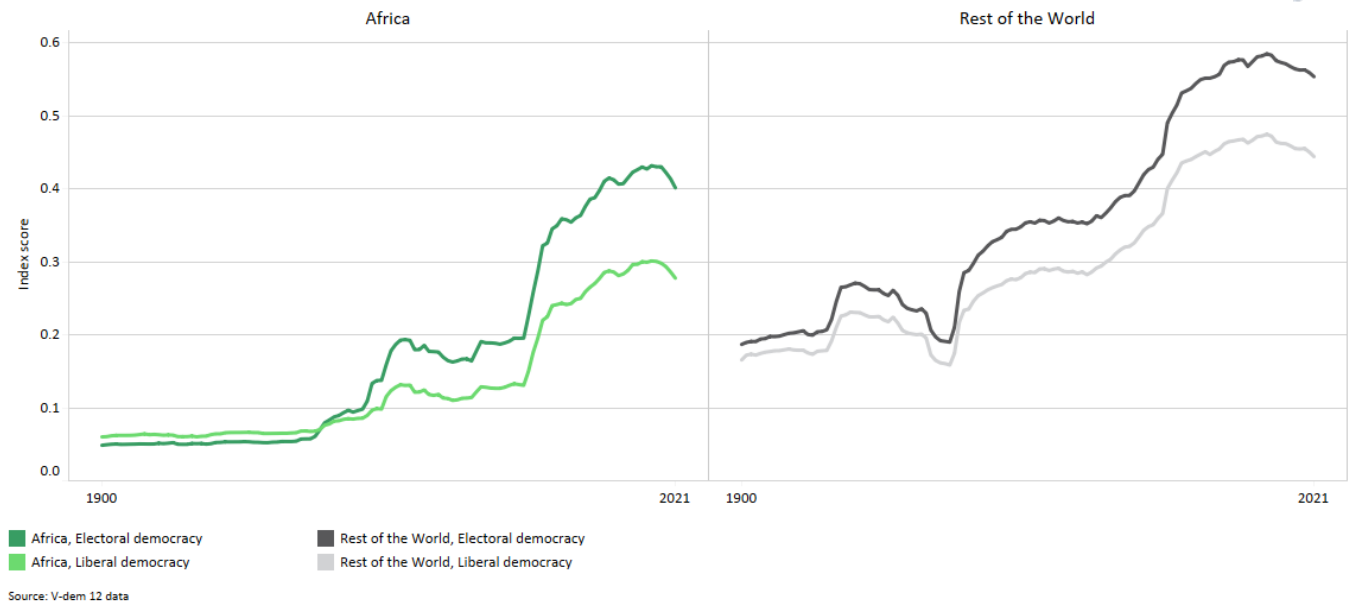
Already a late starter, colonialism compounded the impact of slavery and further hampered the sequential state-formation process in much of Africa. The colonial state was an external imposition — created by outsiders to provide access to Africa's labour, minerals and commodities — to fuel development elsewhere. Formally, colonialism lasted for only around 75 years, but slavery and imperialism had a much longer footprint. To compound matters, once released from the straitjacket of colonialism in the 1960s, Africa's freedom of action, domestic and international, was constrained by the bipolar Cold War until the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989.

The collapse of the Soviet Union ended a series of proxy wars in Africa, where the West and the Soviet bloc had each supported or propped up their client states. The West had triumphed, or so it appeared, and with the subsequent concerns for elections, human rights, and accountability (rather than ideological orientation) came the closely associated global belief in liberal capitalism. Whereas, during the post-colonial period, African states were trapped and held hostage to a bipolar world order that effectively rewarded loyalty rather than democracy or effective governance, the collapse of the Soviet Union allowed a brief post-Cold War peace dividend that saw levels of conflict decline and levels of democracy improve.

The advance of democracy globally

The broad positive trend towards democracy is presented in Chart 2, which shows the evolution of two types of democracy coded by the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Project, namely electoral (nominal or thin democracy) and liberal (substantive or thick democracy). The global averages are shown from 1900 and for Africa from 1960, covering its independence period. The index on the y-axis ranges from 0 (complete absence of democracy) to 1 (full liberal or electoral democracy in all countries). In the five years from 1989 to 1993, levels of electoral and liberal democracy in Africa and globally increased sharply, although the increase in electoral democracy is more pronounced than for liberal democracy.

Chart 2: Trends in the development of electoral and liberal democracies in the world and Africa



In the lexicon of most academics and development practitioners, good governance and democracy are often used interchangeably as they share many characteristics, such as adherence to the rule of law, the importance of institutions and a separation of powers, but there are important differences. Good governance is essentially a broader concept that focuses on the outcomes of governing a country, including effectiveness and efficient public institutions whereas democracy is about the process of governing. Democracy is generally seen as a crucial component of good governance and the latter strengthens democratic institutions and process but a democratic system can also suffer from poor governance.

Over the past two centuries, democracy has advanced in three global waves, reflected in Chart 2, with much of Africa gaining independence as part of the second. With each wave, the quality, depth and reach of democracy have peaked higher before the subsequent trough and changed our understanding of what it means to be governed. Each peak has raised the high-water mark left by its predecessor, granting momentum to an apparent tide of democracy as it envelops increasingly more significant shares of the world's population and more countries. Only China and some oil-rich Gulf states seem immune to its global allure, supported by its recent negative trend, which has given rise to much analysis and commentary on the apparent increase in authoritarianism.

A peaceful electoral transition of power from a governing party to an opposition party, or the defeat of an incumbent president during elections, is an essential benchmark of democracy. By this standard, democracy in Africa is relatively recent. After independence the first peaceful transfer of power occurred in Somalia in 1967 when Abdirashid Ali Sharmarke defeated incumbent President Aden Abdullah Osman Daar. A quarter of a century later, the second occurred in November 1991 when trade union leader Frederick Chiluba defeated incumbent president Kenneth Kaunda in Zambia's first multiparty elections. Popular sentiment was important, but so was external pressure, with governments forced into accepting political liberalisation as part of a set of conditions for the balance of payment support. The latter formed part of the structural adjustment policies initiated in the mid-1980s and followed Africa's debt crisis. In effect, African leaders traded democracy for debt forgiveness and aid. By 2016, African opposition leaders had defeated incumbents in 20 different elections yet, with one or two exceptions.

Many analysts hailed the Arab Spring of 2010 as either the start of a fourth wave of democratisation — as it originated in the region with the lowest levels of political and economic inclusion globally — or proof that the third wave had not yet entirely run its course. Libya, Egypt and several countries in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) have subsequently

suffered devastating blows to peace and stability — and democracy. To date, only Tunisia has emerged from this turmoil with substantially higher scores on the various measures of democracy. However, its democratic transition is increasingly shaky, given the lack of economic opportunity and emancipation.

In 2018 and 2019, a new wave of popular protests swept first across North Africa, starting in Ethiopia and then spilling over into Sudan and Algeria as citizens challenged long-standing parties and rulers. This suggested that before the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on societies, democratisation in Africa was still on an upward trajectory, despite the absence of many of the supposed pre-conditions for democratic consolidation, described as ‘a coherent national identity, strong and autonomous political institutions, a developed and autonomous civil society, the rule of law, and a strong and well-performing [economy](#).’

Overall, democracy in Africa improved significantly with the end of the Cold War in 1989. However, its pre- and post-COVID-19 trajectory was flat and recently negative following a spate of coups in Francophone West Africa.

Globally, levels of electoral democracy are higher than those of liberal democracy, and the gap has grown over time. This gap is much more significant in Africa than elsewhere, reflecting the low quality of democracy, poverty and limited capacity on the continent. In many countries, elections were initially held to respond to external demands although this is changing with demands now coming from Africa's growing young population. Still, the lived experience of political liberties, the rule of law and separation of powers is often absent as elderly elites maintain their grip on power in a continent where the median age of its leadership is higher than in other regions. Regular elections are changing this, but practically, although many African countries have the essential elements of electoral democracy, the incidence of liberal democracy is much less pronounced given the associated requirements of institutionalisation and resources that it requires.

The focus on democracy

From the 1970s, Africa's Western development partners invested in civil service reform and efforts to improve public financial management and helped to set up anti-corruption watchdogs and public audit bodies. Multiparty elections, democratic decentralisation and other methods of achieving citizen participation were equally popular. The World Bank and the International Monetary Fund were at the forefront of these efforts to ensure governments' withdrawal from productive sectors, limiting their role to policymaking and regulatory functions. The focus on good governance as an apparent prerequisite for development in Africa steadily gained traction in the 1980s as international development institutions sought to respond to the challenge of slow growth and high levels of indebtedness and corruption in Africa. In the absence of other means to respond to Africa's slow pace of development, the focus on good governance is essentially a technocratic response from donors and others to bad policies and, especially, bad politics in many African countries.

The mantra of Africa's Western development partners is often that Africa needs to adopt liberal democracy as a prerequisite for development. Democracy, Africans are told, will [lead to better governance](#), which, in turn, will improve development outcomes. However, transformative spurts of economic development do not necessarily require a democratic state (although desirable) but a developmental state in which leaders are genuinely committed to development and have the capacity to make it work.^[6] Also, it is debateable if democracy can compensate for deficiencies in stability and capacity.

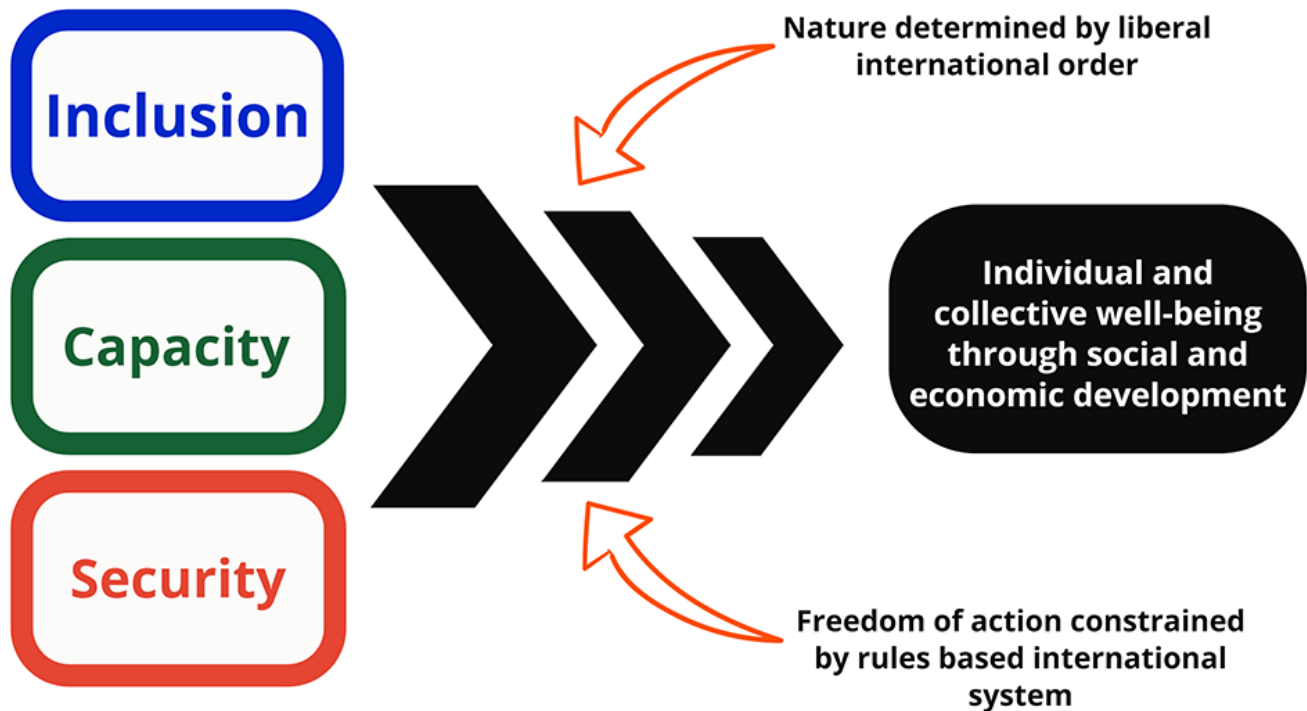
From sequential to simultaneous transitions

In this post-colonial and post-Cold War world, the original sequenced processes of consolidation of security, building capacity and expanded inclusion in Africa now occur simultaneously, reflected in Chart 3. Instead of security serving as a solid footing and enabler for extending the capacity of the state, weak and incomplete security has meant limited capacity. Instead of citizens demanding more inclusion in exchange for fealty to a central government, inclusion was often imposed

in the form of demands for democracy and good governance by the West. The result has been the early democratisation of Africa, meaning that many countries on the continent have higher levels of democracy compared to other countries globally at similarly low levels of education and income.

Generally, political power in much of Africa is now decided at the ballot box and not through the barrel of the gun, although the quality of elections is often low, and incumbents resort to various manoeuvres (legal and illegal) to extend their stay in power.

Chart 3: Governance transitions in post-colonial Africa



Source: Adapted from BB Hughes et al, Patterns of potential human progress: Strengthening governance globally, Boulder: Oxford University Press, 2014

Each dimension, security, capacity and inclusion, is discussed separately below.

Endnotes

1. Each age group was allocated a standard set of social and political duties and produced a conservative, consensual system where respect for the (surviving) elders and their way of doing things was a core tenant of the social structure. J Reader, *Africa: A biography of the continent*, Penguin, London, 1998, 258–262.
2. C Aydon, *The story of man*, Constable, London, 2007, 60–62; J Reader, *Africa: A biography of the continent*, Penguin, 1998, 123–330.
3. J Reader, *Africa: A biography of the continent*, Penguin, London, 1998, 242.
4. J Reader, *Africa: A biography of the continent*, Penguin, London, 1998, 276–278.
5. J Reader, *Africa: A biography of the continent*, Penguin, London, 1998, 404. Domestic and Arab slavery increased when the transatlantic slave trade ended.
6. A Leftwich, Governance, democracy and development in the third world, *Third World Quarterly*, 14:3, 1993, 620.

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Cite this research

Jakkie Cilliers (2025) Governance. Published online at futures.issafrica.org. Retrieved from <https://futures.issafrica.org/thematic/12-governance/> [Online Resource] Updated 18 December 2024.

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Dr Jakkie Cilliers is the ISS's founder and former executive director. He currently serves as chair of the ISS Board of Trustees, head of the African Futures and Innovation (AFI) programme at the Pretoria office of the Institute, and is an extraordinary professor at the University of Pretoria. His 2017 best-seller *Fate of the Nation* addresses South Africa's futures from political, economic and social perspectives. His three most recent books, *Africa First! Igniting a Growth Revolution* (March 2020), *The Future of Africa: Challenges and Opportunities* (April 2021), and *Africa Tomorrow: Pathways to Prosperity* (June 2022) take a rigorous look at the continent as a whole.

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