

State, Leadership, and Governance in Africa: Pathways from Distress

On February 22, 2022, I gave a talk hosted by the African Studies Program of Georgetown University. Two days later, Russian battalions were sent across Ukraine's borders by President Vladimir Putin. In real time, viewers around the world have seen immense distress unleashed on innocent citizens. In Africa, distress has become a state of being for tens of millions, usually attracting short bursts of media attention. The suffering, including mass displacements, can be as great as in Ukraine, although not inflicted with modern weaponry.¹

In a Special Report of the United States Institute of Peace of May 2002, "Smart Partnerships for African Development: A New Strategic Framework", I wrote that "state erosion, corruption, and institutional weakness characterized the public sector in many countries." Much more should be done, I said, "to distill lessons learned regarding governance, state-building, human security, and impediments to economic growth." Two decades later, these deficits have increased to such an extent that "distress" seems more appropriate than "predicament", a term I previously used.

During a recent USIP meeting, Ambassador Johnnie Carson, a former U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for Africa, remarked that our analytical frameworks are being outpaced by developments in the continent. One of my recommendations has been a collaborative learning initiative centered on *Access to Knowledge* or A2K.² To meet contemporary challenges, greater access should be provided to knowledge acquired about the continent. There should also be collaborative ways of expanding this knowledge. To contribute to this effort, I will make a large quantity of my archives, library, and teaching materials accessible to Africans and others. Also to be shared are the steps by which my understanding of core issues evolved.

The postcolonial history of Africa shows a cycle of hope, concern, and crisis. Today there is a new phase: widening distress.³ Some states have cratered and politicians are often locked into financial transactions that constrain their capacity to effect change. Several civilian governments in West Africa have been removed by military coups. Ethiopia segued after April 2018 from a hopeful political transition to domestic warfare and humanitarian catastrophes. A military government was overthrown in Sudan exactly a year later by military officers, to be followed by a military-civilian government and then back to military government. Efforts are underway to find a path out of this morass.

In a decade, South Sudan has plunged from independence to predatory and ethnicized governance. In their quest to siphon the oil wealth and other income flows in a very poor country, political aspirants have provoked violent inter-communal conflicts. Meanwhile, Nigeria has entered an uncertain electoral transition. It will conclude in a year's time with the selection of a new national president and vice-president and new occupants of many state governorships. Formidable hurdles must be overcome.

¹ Bill Berkeley, *The Graves Are Not Yet Full: Race, Tribe and Power in the Heart of Africa* (Basic Books, 2001). I have sometimes used the expression "Hobbesian" to describe such contexts in Africa. However, Thomas Hobbes' "nasty, poor, brutish, and short" does not convey the acute insecurity generated by kidnapping for ransom, including of schoolchildren. A chilling demonstration of the level of insecurity was a terrorist attack on a train from Abuja to Kaduna on March 28, 2022 in northern Nigeria. Several passengers were killed and dozens abducted to be ransomed.

² See the website, *AfricaCLI.org*.

³ My former student and now Director-General of the Nigerian Institute of International Affairs (NIIA), Prof. Eghosa Osaghae, put it squarely: "We are in a tunnel. How do we get out?"

Although my reflections emphasize developments in Nigeria, they can be applied to other African countries. On February 17, 2022, as these remarks were being prepared, a statement appeared in a weekly media column: “Nigeria needs a complete change from a long and unsettling narrative: poverty, high unemployment, endemic corruption, growing feelings of injustice, and a pervading and paralyzing insecurity.”⁴ Similar comments appear regularly as conflicts multiply, public services deteriorate, and secessionist views proliferate.

My USIP colleague Oge Onubogu recently observed that young Nigerians distinguish between *Naija*, a country to which they belong, and *Nigeria*, viewed as being captured by elites. Governing is seen essentially as apportioning public resources in ways more beneficial to office-holders than to the public. What used to be called “Futureless Youth”, urgently seeking an exit from despair, deserve a more appropriate name.⁵ Nigerian scholars use the term “abjection” to refer to life-experiences outside the boundaries of a tolerable existence. There are now tens of millions of young people in the continent, semi-educated at best, with little prospect of legal and sustainable employment.

In an interview following the publication of his latest novel, Wole Soyinka stated that the values and ideals he long advocated were no longer upheld in his own country.⁶ He has referred to Nigeria as having become “derailed”. His comments echo those of other prominent individuals. Hafsat Abiola, for example, the political and human rights activist and daughter of Moshood Abiola, the martyred 1993 elected president, has spoken of the unsuitability of the “design” of the state system in Nigeria. Such voices need to be amplified and brought into conversation with academic scholars. Her views recall arguments made by the renowned political sociologist Peter Ekeh. The search for *Pathways from Distress* would involve revisiting core contentions about state and governance by such notable scholars as Crawford Young, Richard Sklar, Goran Hyden, Marina Ottaway, J-F. Bayart, Jeffrey Herbst, Pierre Englebert, Claude Ake, and Achille Mbembe.

Soon after my first arrival in Nigeria in March 1976, I began studying the country’s transition from military rule to constitutional government. During the summer of 1977, I knitted together what I had learned about the country’s political economy. A published article, “Affluence and Underdevelopment: the Nigerian Experience”, followed in 1978.⁷ The processes described have been replicated many times over. It came as no surprise that the World Poverty Clock declared a few years ago that Nigeria had the largest number of poor people in the world. My key observation four decades earlier was affirmed: national income, even at high levels, did not improve the welfare of most Nigerians.

Five years after the 1978 article, I published what I perceived to be the fundamental mechanism at work. I called it *prebendalism*: state offices are captured and exploited to generate income for their occupants, cronies, and pyramidal networks of identity groups.⁸ This system is evident in other African countries as well as other world regions. The erosion of formal institutions brings benefits to a small number of persons and penury and hardship to the greater majority. Today, this erosion has heightened

⁴ The weekly online column of Prof. Ayo Olukotun that appears in *The Punch* (Lagos).

⁵ In West Africa, the expression used in French was “Barcelona ou la Mort” (Barcelona or Death).

⁶ *Chronicles from the Land of the Happiest People on Earth* (Penguin Random, 2021). See a review by Colin Grant in *The New York Review of Books* (April 7, 2021).

⁷ *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, vol. 16, no. 2 (June 1978).

⁸ “Class, State, and Prebendal Politics in Nigeria,” *The Journal of Commonwealth & Comparative Politics*, vol. XXI, No. 3 (November 1983).

vulnerability to religious extremism and banditry. Even countries seemingly removed from the vortex of Islamic jihadism, such as Mozambique in southern Africa, have fallen victim.

Alex de Waal, the Human Rights scholar, made a key observation when he wrote of “development in reverse” in postcolonial Africa. Instead of the incremental building of institutional capacity, erosion takes place.⁹ From 2005 to 2011, I encountered these challenges directly in the *Research Alliance to Combat HIV/AIDS* (REACH).¹⁰ A University of Ibadan colleague referred to the *loss of capacity to build capacity*. Nigerian academics now call it simply “The Rot”. Former U.S. president Barack Obama alluded to this phenomenon when he spoke of “corrosion from within” in his August 2006 lecture at the University of Nairobi, Kenya. It had become, he said, “The Fight of Our Time”.

In a spirited discussion on February 18, 2022, Prof. Ebenezer Obadare - the new Douglas Dillon Senior Fellow of the Council on Foreign Relations - made important observations about the struggle against religious extremists, especially Boko Haram. Government funds allocated to meet this challenge over a decade have been diverted via prebendalist channels. At the same time, underfunded military and other security forces have declined in their core capacities and functions. It is a debilitating process once closely studied by the World Bank in Kenya. Aid and loan allocations are siphoned off as they flow through government structures. While increased financial resources may be poured into institutions – in this case, the Nigerian armed forces – they simultaneously lose capacity to perform their basic responsibilities. This observation can be made across many public sectors.¹¹

In my inaugural address as John Evans Professor of Northwestern University in 2006, I posed the question: “Misgovernance and the African Predicament: Can the Code be Broken?”¹² In 2020, the same set of issues was discussed in an extended essay: “Nigeria’s Dismal Tunnel: Is there an Exit?” A seminar presentation at Dartmouth College followed in 2021: “The State and Governance Impasse in Africa: Perspectives of a Scholar-Activist”.¹³ The challenges I outlined can no longer be veiled as African citizens speak frankly about them and periodically launch mass protests. ***How can academic and policy institutions bring “Pathways from Distress” to the front and center of their endeavors?*** Or, as Prof. Ayo Olukotun put it simply: “How to end the protracted nightmare?”¹⁴

Ideas to consider:

1. The Social Contract

One of the most fundamental issues in Africa concerns the delivery, or assurance, of minimum standards of public service by governments. Jeffrey Herbst, the former Princeton University political scientist, called a quarter-century ago for the decertification of African states that failed to meet

⁹ This view was captured in my essay, “Pathways from the Pandemic: Africa’s Missing Barn Doors” <https://www.africadli.org/pathways-from-the-pandemic>

¹⁰ Funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, REACH focused primarily on Nigeria.

¹¹ A relevant case is that of Afghanistan. Although the United States and other NATO countries invested huge sums over two decades in the military forces (and a variety of other institutions), they crumbled when the Taliban launched a take-over drive. Corrupt and clientelistic practices were the rot beneath modern military armaments and uniforms.

¹² It was also delivered as a Distinguished Lecture at the Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Ibadan, in November 2006.

¹³ Both texts are available on Arch Library.

¹⁴ *The Punch* (Lagos), March 24, 2022.

basic standards of capacity, integrity, and public service.¹⁵ His article in the 1996-97 issue of *International Security* was entitled “Responding to State Failure in Africa”. Decertification would mean that sovereign claims by such entities, as concerns eligibility for international aid and loans, would no longer be recognized. I contested Herbst’s arguments while acknowledging the shortcomings he identified.¹⁶ Since the publication of our exchange, these deficits have multiplied. Meanwhile, the leverage of western powers and institutions has diminished as a consequence of geopolitical and geo-economic shifts.

A renewed starting point could be the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights which included, according to Frank X. Sutton, the obligation of all nations “to seek *material betterment* and the observance of a long list of rights”.¹⁷ The latter includes a “universal right to education” regarded as “an indispensable pillar of development”. A restart can also be anchored to promises of the anti-colonial struggle: “Seek Ye first the Political Kingdom, and all things will be added unto you” (Kwame Nkrumah) and “Life More Abundant” (Obafemi Awolowo).

2. Beyond Prebendalism

“The Logic and Legacy of Prebendalism in Nigeria” is the title of my epilogue in Wale Adebani and Ebenezer Obadare’s edited book, *Democracy and Prebendalism in Nigeria: Critical Interpretations* (2013).¹⁸ This essay can serve as the *prologue* to a comparative examination of where and how prebendalist practices have been reduced. My Northwestern University colleague, Professor Monica Prasad, has conducted pertinent research on the building of islands of integrity.¹⁹ A Nigerian colleague, Abimbola Agboluaje, once inquired if a shortened version of my book, *Democracy and Prebendal Politics in Nigeria: The Rise and Fall of the Second Republic*, could be produced and widely disseminated.²⁰ Such a project is feasible. Moreover, prebendalism could be taught in schools alongside texts on how state offices operate elsewhere and yield desired outcomes.

3. The New Scramble for Africa

The withdrawal of over 4,000 armed personnel, dispatched by France to Mali in 2013 to counter jihadist insurgencies, has increased the ungoverned and insecure lands of Sahelian Africa. Achille Mbembe once spoke of the return to the nineteenth century in Africa as entities with varying authority structures jostle with constituted states. Whatever their structures, they became vulnerable to manipulation and domination by external powers. Eventually, they were swept under the umbrella of colonial rule. French military forces seized large expanses of west and equatorial

¹⁵ My USIP colleague Amb. Johnnie Carson often asks: “What can be done to get African governments to improve the services provided to citizens?”

¹⁶ *International Security*, vol. 22, no. 2 (fall 1997). Jeffrey Herbst authored one of the finest books on statehood in Africa:

¹⁷ Sutton’s remarks were made in a talk to the Social Science Research (SSRC): “Rationality, Development, and Scholarship,” *ITEMS*, vol. 36, no. 4 (December 1982). He was a longtime senior official of the Ford Foundation.

¹⁸ (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

¹⁹ See R. Joseph, “Nigeria’s Dismal Tunnel: Is there an Exit?”. *Arch Library*, September 18, 2020. “Islands” I felt could exist in a prebendalist ocean. Still unknown is how they can link up to create a land mass of *institutions* of integrity.

²⁰ Cambridge University Press, 1987/2014.

Africa. After over a century of domination in varying disguises, France's hegemony is steadily eroding.

What are appropriate responses to a new "Scramble" for Africa? An array of armed groups now operate in eastern Congo. Somalia has not been a national entity since the Siad Barre regime collapsed in 1991. The Delta area, and the southeast and northeast of Nigeria, are experiencing fragmentation and secessionist movements. Prof. Obadare suggested that Nigeria could now be viewed as three different countries, reflecting the former British-designated regions. John Campbell contends that its corporate status should be "rethought".²¹ How, indeed, do the expanding ungoverned, and contested, areas in Africa square with the nation-state model?

4. Democracy at Bay

The events of January 6 and January 20, 2021 in the U.S. Capitol reverberated in Africa as elsewhere in the world. On the first date, a severe threat to democratic institutions unfolded. On the second, impressive inaugural ceremonies were conducted for the new U.S. president and vice-president. In the Council on Foreign Relations event referred to above, Prof. Obadare emphasized the significance of American constitutional democracy for African nations.

Also pertinent is David Brooks' declaration, in a long essay in *The New York Times* on February 18, that "The Century of the Strongman" has begun. What, it can be asked, has become of former President Barack Obama's declaration in Accra, Ghana, in July 2009 that Africa needed "strong institutions, not strongmen"? What will become of President Joe Biden's signature foreign policy initiative on global democracy? The number of democratic governments in Africa is shrinking again while the American "exemplar" is increasingly contested at home. Yet popular support for democracy in Africa has been repeatedly confirmed by *Afrobarometer*. There is a need for collaborative reflections on these contradictory trends.

5. Building on Success

A question once frequently posed is being asked anew: Where are the successes in Africa in building national cohesion, democratic government, economic inclusion, and the minimizing of group conflicts? Among mid-sized countries, Ghana stands out for what has been achieved, especially since the transition from military to constitutional government three decades ago. Why has Ghana succeeded? Can its model be replicated?

Zambia, which returned to multiparty democracy ahead of Ghana in 1991, has traversed a different course. An autocratic trend was dramatically reversed with the sweeping electoral victory in August 2021 of the *United Party for National Development* and its presidential candidate, Hakainde Hichilema. This important but fragile victory must be deepened and consolidated. The key choice in Africa appears to be, not between strongmen and strong institutions, but capable and determined leaders - able to bolster fragile institutions - and the many countervailing forces. Much learning can be distilled from three decades of disparate country experiences.

²¹ *Nigeria and the Nation-State: Rethinking Diplomacy in the Postcolonial World* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2020).

6. Local and Communal Governance

There is an important area of scholarship that has not been fully incorporated into the mainstream of research on African politics and governance. The contentions of Peter Ekeh and Richard Sklar were earlier mentioned. Other scholars, such as Stephen Ndegwa, have contrasted constitutionalism, as it pertains to particular (especially ethnic) communities, and constitutionalism at the level of the state. The anthropologist and linguist, Fallou Ngom, of Boston University calls attention to institutions and practices in local governance that are not adequately taken into account by analysts of formal political institutions.

More attention should be devoted to the duality to which these scholars refer. The disciplines of political science, and anthropology/cultural studies, employ approaches, terminologies, and methodologies that are dissimilar. Crossing these boundaries are researchers on chieftaincy systems.²² Institutional legitimacy, efficacy, and accountability can be addressed more cogently if our conceptual approaches transcend dualistic perceptions.

7. Educational Systems

The decline of educational systems in Africa has had a profound impact on social equity and institutional capacities. The quality of education that an individual receives depends greatly on family financial means. Sending children abroad to study, starting at secondary levels and continuing through higher education, is often the only way to ensure that they obtain uninterrupted and adequate schooling. This practice, of course, means that many Africans will go on to make their careers abroad.

New approaches to shared and collaborative learning must be explored. Digitization and Internet technologies provide important avenues to address these disparities. *Amplifying Voices*, a core dimension of *Pathways from Distress*, would enable citizens of African societies to express their discontent over the diminished supply of educational opportunities. However, expressing discontent is not enough. Also severely lacking in Africa (as mentioned above) is the capacity to build and sustain modern institutions. The two processes should reinforce each other.

8. Cultural Repertoires

I have long been intrigued by the vitality and abundance of African cultural production, and how it contrasts with the weakness of governmental and economic institutions. African contributions to artistic endeavors are outstanding in many realms: sculpture, fabrics, music, dance, theatre, cinema, painting ...the list is endless. These endeavors require diligent training and long apprenticeships. They merge intellect and spirit, emotion and efficacy. Why are these qualities so manifest in cultural spheres yet so absent in those needed for security, basic services, and economic growth? How can the capacities in one realm be transferred to the other?

²² This is an increasingly vibrant area of scholarly research. See Olufemi Vaughan, *Nigerian Chiefs: Traditional Power in Modern Politics, 1890s-1990s* (University of Rochester Press, 2000) and Kate Baldwin, *The Paradox of Traditional Chiefs in Democratic Africa* (Cambridge University Press, 2015).

My collection of *Adire* fabrics from southwest Nigeria perpetually fascinate and inspire. It would take an expert to explain their motifs, and the science and technology involved in their production.²³ They contrast with African institutions that once flourished but are now diminished. The *Adire* fabrics derive from the same region where roadways, water, health, electricity, and educational systems have diminished. Perhaps the return of great African artworks to the continent, and the continued vitality of cultural production in many areas – cinema, music, and design – will spark a renaissance in political and economic construction.

9. *Diasporas*

Wole Soyinka has contended that African independence movements erred in constructing pan-African organizations on a continental basis. There were too many cultural and other disparities to overcome between sub-Saharan Africa and countries along the Mediterranean coastline. Instead, he contends, the focus should have been on Africa and its diasporas, especially in the Americas. I will not discuss the merits of a northward versus a cross-Atlantic perspective, while acknowledging the significance of the latter.

Soyinka's perspective is increasingly pertinent. The African-American diaspora is experiencing an upward surge as a consequence of the *Black Lives Matter* movement and other challenges to centuries of racial injustice. This awareness is also evident in other former imperial countries, notably France. The development deficits in Africa, alongside the resurgence of autocratic and repressive systems, have encouraged many of the continent's best talents to pursue their careers abroad. A renewed Pan-Africanism can be an essential component of *Pathways from Distress*.

10. *Africa and the Digitized World*

Digitization and Internet technologies represent important pathways for knowledge acquisition and sharing. Africans excel in all aspects of modern technologies. Efforts to launch a *Collaborative Learning Initiative* in 2018 will be resumed. The digitization of archival materials. will be accelerated.²⁴ An *Arima Project*, long envisioned, can develop a model of knowledge-building based on African realities, African needs, and global (including African) resources.²⁵

Young people the world over are adept at using and creating Internet systems. Given the necessary support and material means, they can devise new global learning spaces. Modern technologies can be used to transcend physical distances and overcome disparities in institutional endowment. The time has come to take advantage of unique opportunities to universalize and democratize *Access to Knowledge*. Expanding learning and knowledge is the fundamental ground for sustainable and inclusive development. A level playing field in knowledge acquisition can be established in cost-effective ways.

²³ I possess a very instructive publication: Jane Barbour and Doig Simmonds, *Adire Cloth in Nigeria* (The Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan, 1971).

²⁴ A full set of *Africa Demos*, a bulletin of the African Governance Program of The Carter Center (1990-1994), and essays and commentaries on *AfricaPlus*, are now available on Arch Library of Northwestern University.

²⁵ Arima is my birthplace in Trinidad and Tobago. It also refers to *Alliance to Re-imagine Africa*.

