

Africa: Changing Politics in a Changing World

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Abstract:

In the period leading up to their independence and thereafter, African countries have, individually and collectively, been the object of intense global academic and policy interest as to create the basis for the emergence of a broad field of research and teaching known and defined as African Studies. It is a field that has developed through various phases over the last six decades or so and covers various thematic areas of interest, among them African politics and Africa's international relations. As could be expected, in the context of the nation and state-building challenges that African countries confronted in the wake of their independence, significant attention was devoted from the outset to seeking an understanding of the pulse of politics across the continent and the factors, both historical and contemporaneous, that drive it. Out of the understanding that was developed at different points in time of the dynamics of African politics, the locus of influence and authority, the character of ruling elites, the form of the state, and the mode of mobilization of legitimacy, different interpretative frames were put forward either as general propositions or distinct theories about nature and use of power within African countries and its refraction into their international relations. Although particular interpretative frames have predominated at different points in time, African Studies was and continues to be rife with sharply differing analytic perspectives which speak to a large extent to the difficulty of reading a large and complex continent with simplistic lenses that sacrifice a nuanced insight for trending one-size-fits-all homogenizing explanations. In addressing the question of the new challenges which African Studies must respond to in order to offer a better nuanced understanding of African politics and international relations, this essay will point to the critical shortfalls of the main theoretical postulations that have dominated different narratives and explanatory variables over the last 60 years with a view to proposing an agenda for future work at a time of rapid all-round changes the continent is going through. Out of the agenda, new and better calibrated frames of analysis fit for understanding changing politics in Africa in an equally changing world might stand a chance of being constructed.