

## I

## Economic Inequalities and Territorial Oppositions in African Politics

Geography has been a blind spot for political scientists.

Rodden 2010: 322

Poor countries are not uniformly poor.

Azam 2006: 213

### INTRODUCTION

Socioeconomic inequality is very high in African countries, but very little systematic scholarly attention has been given to the political effects of this. Many attributes of African economies predict high inequality, including natural resource dependence, trade openness, and low levels of economic development. Economic theory long held that, under these conditions, development itself would *increase* socioeconomic inequality (Kuznets 1963; Williamson 1965). Because so much social science research takes inequality as an indicator of latent social conflict, simple deduction might lead one to expect rancor and division over economic policy and redistributive issues to structure national political life in African countries. Yet much of political science writing on African countries argues that structural socioeconomic disparities are *not* politicized in any systematic way, except in some extreme cases of civil war, and has pointed a finger at *cultural* or communal differences to explain political division.<sup>1</sup> This presents a puzzle that has bedeviled several generations of research on African political economy. Do socioeconomic cleavages and

<sup>1</sup> Structural grievances are those derived from an individual or group's disadvantaged position in society. Thus, Boix (2003), Acemoglu and Robinson (2006), and Svolik (2012) argue that economic inequality can be taken as a proxy for the threat of mass opposition to authoritarian regimes (Thomson 2018: 1598).

2 *Economic Inequalities and Territorial Oppositions in African Politics*

economic interests structure national political life in African countries, as theory would predict? If so, how, and why?

Existing work in Africa-centered political science has attempted to solve the inequality puzzle by arguing that in African countries, political elites manipulate deep-rooted ethnic identities to channel politics along the lines of patron–client relationships, undercutting possibilities for the mobilization of class-based or issue-based politics. Ethnic clientelism focuses the political energies of individuals and communities on the micropolitics of retail-level provision of clinics and boreholes, sidelining policy issues of national consequence. Most scholarly work thus suggests that socioeconomic cleavages do not structure national political debate, or may do so only at the margins, *because of* the intense salience of ethnic politics. What scholars have read as the weakness of electoral pressures for development-oriented policies in African countries is taken as evidence in support of this view.

This book advances a different theory. I argue that while scholars have not found strongly politicized class cleavages in most African countries, they have missed the dominant form of inequality politics in African countries. At the national level, the most politically salient form of economic inequality is *spatial inequality*. I theorize that spatial inequalities between regions go far in structuring political competition in national elections, and that these same regional cleavages underpin the enduring salience of competition around territorially targeted economic policy and issues of constitutional design.

This theory is rooted in comparative political economy (CPE) literatures on why, how, and which geographic inequalities become salient in national politics. Most such work has been developed through research on European and Latin American countries. In this book, I show that this regional perspective on political economy resonates strongly in most African countries.

In most African countries, regional economic differentiation and inequality are strongly accentuated by territorial institutions that channel both political representation and state action. Strongly regionalized economies have developed within the framework of strongly territorial political institutions. Much theory in CPE predicts that, where spatial inequalities are high and territorial institutions are strong, regionalist interests and political strategies tend to predominate over programmatic, state-wide strategies across many policy and governance arenas (Beramendi 2012; Rogers 2016). I find that this is indeed the case in much of Africa. What classic works in social cleavage theory call the “spatial–territorial dimension of politics” is a critical but largely unobserved and undertheorized driver of political competition in African countries (Lipset & Rokkan 1967; Rokkan 1971; Caramani 2004). These regional dynamics transcend the spatial and temporal scale of individual patron–client ties and local ethnic identities that are observed in individual acts of voting or one-off clientelistic exchanges within electoral constituencies. By placing microlevel behavior in a wider context, this book brings the larger stakes and purposes of national politics into focus.

## Introduction

3

Significant research programs in comparative politics associate stark regional inequalities with distinctive sets of political and economic challenges. In countries as diverse as Italy, Spain, Germany, Indonesia, and China, regionalized competition exerts a pull on the overall character of national politics, development trajectories, and patterns of policy competition. Around the world, economic inequality across subnational regions is strongly associated with core–periphery tensions, tensions between wealth-generating and lagging regions, problems of national integration (including the high political salience of ethnic and regional identities), and tensions arising from divergent regional policy preferences (Rogers 2016). In cross-national studies, underprovision of public goods, weak programmatic politics, the prevalence of accountability-eroding electoral clientelism, and civil conflict around questions of territorial dominance or autonomy are sociopolitical ills that have been attributed, at least in part, to high levels of spatial inequality. The relationship of “ethnicity” to these outcomes is variable and contingent, even within the context of one country.

In African countries, the lack of systematic and reliable empirical data at the subnational level has made it difficult to develop and test theories linking spatial inequalities and political outcomes. An earlier generation of qualitative political scientists and historians accorded considerable importance to the role of regional tensions in shaping politics in the 1950s through the 1970s, and these insights have fed into contemporary research that considers regional politics and questions of national integration.<sup>2</sup> So far, however, this type of analysis has not congealed into theories of structure and variation in national-level electoral geography, or of territorial dynamics in African politics.

From the 1990s onward, much scholarship on African politics has downplayed spatial inequalities and has seen politicized *cultural* heterogeneity as the cause of political division and of the prevalence of clientelism over substantive policy appeals in elections. Influential political sociologists and economists, such as Donald Horowitz (1985) and Easterly and Levine (1997), along with a generation of scholars focused on elections and individual voting behavior in the multiparty era, identified ethnicity as an overwhelmingly determinant force in African politics *and* an ideological force that is orthogonal to – that is, that cuts across and neutralizes – programmatic economic interests and socioeconomic cleavages. Many of these scholars would grant that ethnicity produces a territorial or regional effect when coethnics are spatially clustered, but the spatial clustering itself is often portrayed as an *effect* of ethnicity, a prepolitical expression of ideological or cultural preference rooted in the distant past, and exogenous to politics. Institutions and economic geography are usually taken to be invariant (or controlled for) within and across countries. Two key shapers of structure and variation in political competition within and across nations – institutions and economic geography – are thus left out of the analysis.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Englebert 2003, 2005; Forrest 2004; Albaugh 2011; Arriola 2013; Morse 2014; Bates 2017; Rabinowitz 2018; LeVan 2019.

4 *Economic Inequalities and Territorial Oppositions in African Politics*

This work leverages CPE theories of social cleavage, uneven development, and institutions to propose a theory of the sources and correlates of regional cleavage in national politics. I will argue that these give structure to electoral competition at the national level and shape the policy content of the national political agenda in many, perhaps most, African countries.

A theory of regional cleavages as the driver of national politics links the study of politics in Africa to classic works on social cleavage and political economy in other parts of the world. This opens the door to significant revisions of prevailing axioms in the study of African politics. Many inferences about national-level politics that are extrapolated directly from micro studies of electoral behavior ignore the ways in which factors that are unobserved in micro studies – including highly uneven patterns of economic development and strongly territorial political institutions – shape politics at the national level. I argue here that economic geography and political institutions play a significant role in shaping political interests and identities, producing cohesion and division in these over time, and in defining the mechanisms and dynamics by which local-level clientelism may (or may not) be subsumed within regional-level electoral cleavages. My analysis replaces common arguments about volatility and fluidity in national political alignments in Africa with theory and evidence of persistent cleavage structures over time. This more expansive theoretical framing sharpens our ability to draw political inferences from existing descriptions of ethnic and electoral politics and reveals the larger stakes in political and policy debates that have long been sidelined in political science studies of African countries.

In an influential study, Herbst (2000) pointed to political divisions along geographic lines in African countries when he wrote of the stark cleavage between capital cities and rural hinterlands. Herbst depicted hinterlands as largely resistant to incorporation into the national fold, and to the “rural areas” as constituting a largely undifferentiated and recalcitrant periphery in most countries. Here, I invert Herbst’s model by locating dynamic drivers of politics *in the regions*. What Herbst refers to generically as the “hinterlands” are treated here as segmented and differentiated landscapes composed of regions marked by economic inequalities and power differentials, variable alignments vis-à-vis the center, distinctive production profiles and economic interests, and varying modes and degrees of integration into the national economy. Relations among such regions are potentially competitive, with tension arising from rival policy preferences and competing visions of state- and economy-building. National regimes are shown to be rooted to a very significant extent in regional strongholds, to achieve national predominance on the basis of predominantly rural electoral coalitions, and to be invested politically in the prosperity of regionally specific sectors of the economy (Rabinowitz 2018). In many African countries, the persistent lines of social cleavage that are visible at the national level are *regional* in nature, often taking forms that are familiar to scholars of regional competition and cleavage in other parts of the world.

1.1 INEQUALITY STRUCTURES IN AFRICAN COUNTRIES

This work focuses on territorial oppositions – the divergent interests and priorities of subnational regions in relation to, and in competition with, each other – that grow out of the process of building a national state and economy. It argues that institutions contribute to the structuring of these territorial differences and inequalities, and that institutions work to bring these inequalities to the fore in national political competition.

My point of departure is the dramatic extent of both interpersonal income inequality and regional economic disparities in most African countries. Not only are some of the world’s highest levels of interpersonal income inequality found in sub-Saharan African countries, but levels of spatial inequality among regions (provinces) in most African countries are *also* extremely high. Economic disparities across subnational regions in most African countries are higher than they are in textbook cases of high spatial inequality featured in the CPE literature – including Spain, the United States, Mexico, and Argentina.

These strong inequality patterns are captured in the scatterplot in Figure 1.1, adapted from Rogers (2016). High inequality countries from around the world – including Brazil, Mexico, Malaysia, and the USA – are featured in orange, for comparison.

The vertical axis captures interpersonal income inequality. Measured by national Gini coefficients (as shown), Africa’s levels of income inequality are among the highest in the world, even exceeding Latin America’s stratospheric

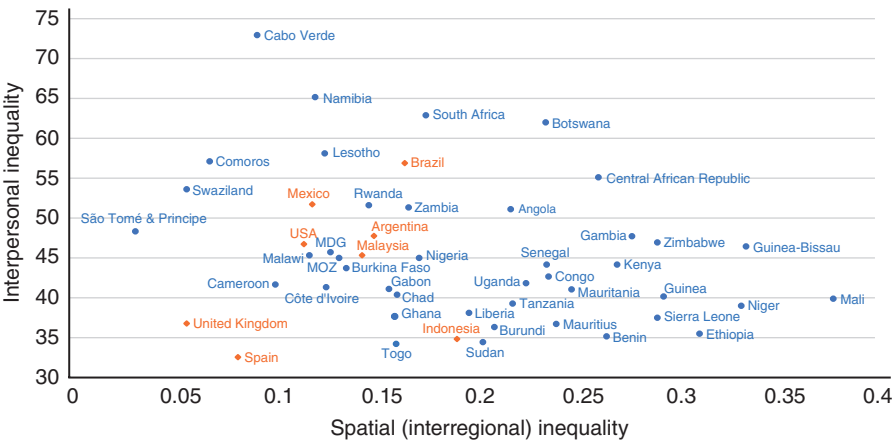


FIGURE 1.1 Interpersonal and spatial inequality in African countries, 2012 (with comparison to some other high inequality countries)

Notes and sources: The Y-axis is the coefficient of variation in adjusted nighttime luminosity across provinces (Admin1 regions), unweighted for population, in 2012 (Lessmann & Seidel 2015, 2017). The X-axis is Gini of interpersonal income inequality (Milanovic 2014). See Appendix Figure A1.1 for the population weighted data.

6 *Economic Inequalities and Territorial Oppositions in African Politics*

levels by some measures.<sup>3</sup> By the Gini index of household consumption expenditure for 2008, Africa was the world's most unequal macroregion, with a Gini of 67 compared to 50 for Latin America and the Caribbean.<sup>4</sup> These high levels of interpersonal inequality are a long-standing feature of economic structure in African countries and have been traced back to the 1950s, when the earliest data are available (Milanovic 2014: 11).

The income Gini captures the familiar picture of African societies as polarized between small, wealthy elites in urban, formal sector employment (i.e., positions in the higher echelons of the state, and in top private and multinational firms) on the one hand, and large majorities trapped in low-productivity rural livelihoods (agriculture, pastoralism, etc.) and the informal sector. As van de Walle explained (2009), the smallness and weakness of the middle class is a corollary of this bifurcation. National-level policy factors, including regressive taxation structure and very low levels of income redistribution, contribute to high levels of interpersonal inequality, but the main drivers lie on the production side. There is strong variation across African countries: Those with higher levels of economic development tend to score higher on the Gini index.<sup>5</sup> This is consistent with Kuznets' prediction that development itself would increase interpersonal income inequality.

The horizontal axis in Figure 1.1 measures spatial inequality. The figure captures variation in levels of economic development across provinces, proxied by nighttime luminosity, a commonly used if coarse measure of subnational GDP. By this measure, levels of spatial inequality, or inequality across provinces, in sub-Saharan Africa countries also rank among the highest in the world (Table A.1).<sup>6</sup> Most African countries rank higher on this measure than country exemplars of very high spatial inequality featured in the CPE literature, including the United Kingdom, Spain, Indonesia, Argentina, and Mexico.

<sup>3</sup> World Bank Povcalnet consumption data show seven of the world's ten most unequal countries are in Africa, with the regional average country consumption Gini of 0.43 the highest regional average in the world (Beegle et al. 2016: 127).

<sup>4</sup> Jirasevetakul and Langer 2016: 9. This figure includes North Africa. Shimeles and Nagassaga examine asset inequality data for forty-four African countries over two decades and report that average asset-based Ginis are in the 40–45% range, which “could easily imply that the top 1% owned 35–40% of household assets and amenities in Africa” (2017:17). See Jerven 2013 on data quality problems.

<sup>5</sup> This relationship holds even when Africa's ten most unequal countries are removed from the sample (Shimeles & Nagassaga 2017: 12 *inter alia*).

<sup>6</sup> Lessmann and Seidel (2017) report average coefficients of variation in predicted GDP per capita at the Admin1 level (based on adjusted nighttime luminosity data) for 1992–2012. In a study based on national accounts data from all world regions, Gennaioli et al. (2014) found that the ratio of GDP per capita across Admin1 regions in 2010, excluding the region of the capital city, differed by a factor of almost 3 for Kenya, Mozambique, and Benin, and by a factor of 2.0 for Tanzania. For the United Kingdom, it was 1.3 (1.8 with the capital city included). For similar conclusions about inequality for eleven African countries from an IMF team using individual-level consumption and birthplace data, see Brunori et al. 2016.

### 1.1 Inequality Structures in African Countries

7

Indeed, in a global sample of countries measuring spatial inequality, almost all African countries stand out with extreme scores on the spatial inequality dimension (along with a number of non-African countries, including Syria and Pakistan).

In African countries, national capitals do have stark advantages over the provinces in terms of levels of economic development, as the urban bias literature underscores. Yet these data and many alternative measures of spatial inequality show that *there are also sharp differences across predominantly rural regions*. In Tanzania in 2016, for example, average consumption per adult in Manyara region, the richest of the provinces, was almost three times that of Ruvuma and Kigoma regions.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, in Ghana, living standards in the central cocoa-producing regions are twice what they are in the poorest rural regions of the northern savanna, where livelihoods are centered on pastoralism and subsistence agriculture. In Kenya, early childhood mortality rates are almost *four times* higher in the western county of Homa Bay, lying on the lowland shores of Lake Victoria, than they are in Nyeri County in the agriculturally rich central highlands.<sup>8</sup> As Sahn and Stifel argued, in most countries, indicators of poverty “differ markedly *between rural regions* of almost every country” (2000: 593). Changes over time in rural well-being – net improvements and declines – also “differ dramatically across rural areas” and are often highly regionalized (Sahn & Stifel 2000: 593). When countries are growing, some rural regions benefit, while others fall behind.

The existence of two forms of extreme socioeconomic inequality – interpersonal income inequality *and* spatial inequality across regions – complicates the inequality puzzle in African countries. Melissa Rogers argued that “these indicators represent distinct potential distributional conflicts within a nation” (2016: 27). In Rogers’ global sample of countries, interpersonal and spatial (interregional) inequality are weakly correlated. She found this to be the case for sub-Saharan Africa, as well. Some countries are indeed marked by levels of interpersonal *income* inequality that are far more extreme (by both world and African standards) than their levels of *spatial* inequality.<sup>9</sup> South Africa is the clearest example. Others exhibit the reverse combination, where *spatial*

<sup>7</sup> See Boone and Simson 2019: Appendix 1, Table E. Calculated from DHS consumption data.

<sup>8</sup> “Children born in Homa Bay county were 5 times as likely to die before age 5 as children born in Nyeri County in 1965 and reduced to 3.8 times by 2013. The Western part of the country was the worst place to be born [in 1965] and remained the most disadvantaged through to 2013” (Macharia et al. 2019).

<sup>9</sup> Using the unweighted CoV across Admin1 regions, we also observed a strong and highly significant negative correlation between the two inequality measures (Boone & Simson 2019). The correlation coefficient is  $-0.40$  at the  $0.01$  level. Countries with higher interpersonal inequality (generally the more economically developed countries, such as South Africa and Namibia) register lower spatial inequality. In general, the poorer countries are marked by higher levels of spatial inequality (i.e., of dispersion in the nightlight-based proxy measure for regional GDP per capita).



8 *Economic Inequalities and Territorial Oppositions in African Politics*

inequality appears far more extreme than *income* inequality. Mali and Ethiopia are exemplars of this pattern. Yet for most African countries, *both* income and spatial inequality are very high by world standards. The presence of both high income and high spatial inequality means that there are stark *potential* lines of socioeconomic cleavage and distributional conflict in most African countries. Will structural economic inequalities find expression in politics, and if so, which ones, and how?

So far, most studies of African electoral politics have discounted programmatic economic concerns as a driver of political competition, or argued explicitly that the ethnic cleavages visible at the national level are not systematically related to structural socioeconomic cleavages. This is puzzling for comparative political economists who expect inequalities rooted in the economy – be they along class, sectional, or sectoral lines – to stoke systemic distributive conflict.

## 1.2 MAIN ARGUMENT

CPE scholars argue that *institutional structure* is critical in shaping inequality's political effects. A substantial line of theory predicts that, where strong regional inequalities are overlaid by strongly territorial institutions, “distributional conflict will exist primarily among territorial groups” (Rogers 2016: 2). Strongly territorial political institutions will work to *accentuate* the political salience of spatial inequality and to channel the politics of inequality into “a distribution game ... across and within geographic districts” (Rogers 2016: 2; see also Rodden 2010; Beramendi 2012).

In this book, I deploy this insight to identify and unlock the puzzle of inequality politics in African countries. In most African countries, spatial inequality is high, *and* structures of political representation, government administration, and resource allocation are *strongly territorial*. As CPE theory would predict, in most African countries, national competition can be described as “territorial politics in regionally divided countries.”

Figure 1.2 captures theoretical expectations about the relationship between high spatial inequality and strongly territorial institutions (Rogers 2016), and locates African countries on this conceptual map. My main argument is that most African countries fall into Cell 1 of Figure 1.2, where high spatial inequality and strongly territorial institutions coincide, and that territorial politics predominates. Yet there is cross-national variation in the relationship between institutional and inequality structures in African countries, as noted above, and this offers some additional analytic leverage.

Most African countries are located in Cell 1 in Figure 1.2. Rural populations predominate – in most countries, over 50% of the population is largely dependent on land-based livelihoods. In most, natural endowment is highly unevenly distributed across space, giving rise to strong sectoral-spatial differentiation. This unevenness is associated with spatial inequalities and different modes of integration into the national polity and economy. Strongly territorial



Spatial (Regional) Inequality		
	Higher	Lower
Territorial Institutions	1. regional politics predominates. e.g. Kenya	2. not expected
	3. regional competition is muted; regional tensions are not easily channeled directly into politics. e.g. ~ TZ	4. class- or rich-poor politics. e.g. South Africa

FIGURE 1.2 Territorially divided states: Theoretical expectations and African exemplars

Notes: Territorially divided states are characterized by high spatial inequality and strongly territorial institutions that align with geographical economic disparities, as typified in Cell 1. “TZ” is mainland Tanzania.

institutions of administration, political representation, and land tenure (property rights in land) overlay regionalized patterns of economic development and magnify their political salience. Rules of electoral competition, including multiparty competition organized around territorially defined electoral constituencies, contribute to the political salience of geographically specific interests. In these countries, regionalism is expected to trump class politics. Examples are Kenya, Zambia, and Côte d’Ivoire.

In Cell 4 of Figure 1.2, where strongly centralizing institutions coincide with lower spatial inequality, the political salience of interpersonal income and class differences is expected to be stronger. In more industrialized and urbanized countries, the political salience of spatial inequality falls relative to income inequality. With nationally integrated labor markets and high levels of proletarianization, the salience of rich–poor polarization increases in national politics. Universalizing institutions associated with the development of mass- and class-based society – such as national parties and trade unions – give voice to class-like demands and policy responses. Administrative divisions cut across, rather than overlay and reinforce, the most extreme spatial disparities. In the sub-Saharan Africa context, South Africa is the exemplar. In South Africa, a strongly integrated national bureaucracy and an electoral system based on proportional representation have also promoted what Caramani (2004) calls the “nationalization of politics.”<sup>10</sup> Under these conditions, class politics dilutes

<sup>10</sup> There are indeed persistent regional electoral blocs in Western Cape and part of KwaZulu-Natal, respectively. These exist as exceptions to the predominant, nationalized voting pattern. See Chapters 4 and 7.

10 *Economic Inequalities and Territorial Oppositions in African Politics*

or trumps the politics of regionalism. In Botswana and Namibia, where levels of urbanization and of interpersonal income inequality are also very high, territorial cleavages also have lower political salience (see Baleyte et al. 2020). In these counterfactual cases, regional tensions do not predominate; they are overwhelmed by other social cleavages.<sup>11</sup>

The two cells on the opposite diagonal are theoretically generated types that are not associated with unambiguous empirical referents in the African context. Cell 2, where spatial inequality is low and national institutions are strongly territorial, is not expected in African countries. Under colonial rule, strongly territorial state institutions coevolved with highly uneven patterns of economic development and political control of African populations (see Chapter 3).

Cell 3 describes a configuration in which spatial inequality is high, but strongly nationalizing institutions mute or dilute the salience of territorial identities and interests, and provide few supports for regional interests to coalesce in the political arena. As suggested in Figure 1.2, Tanzania has features that pull it toward Cell 3, but it is not a pure type (as indicated by the tilde).<sup>12</sup> While there are clear patterns of regional inequality and Tanzania's electoral rules encourage the political expression of territorial interests, key features of institutional structure have been nationalizing: These include centralized ruling party and line-ministry control over regional, district, and local administration; direct administration of rural localities; nationalizing (rather than region- or district-specific) land tenure institutions; and one-party rule between 1965 and 1995.<sup>13</sup> Regional tensions have decisively shaped the national trajectory, but in mainland Tanzania these have been attenuated for much of the last sixty years of independence.

This book argues that in most sub-Saharan Africa countries from the 1950s to today, including the post-1990 era multiparty politics, the salience of territorial politics has been high. I show that national politics in many and perhaps most African countries is structured along regional lines in ways that are critical to understanding the stakes of economic modernization and bureaucratic consolidation. Cell 1 captures the predominant tendency, describing not only Kenya but also most of the countries in the twelve-country study (see Section 1.4) that provides empirical foundations for the main arguments advanced

<sup>11</sup> For Botswana, this could be conceptualized as an urban–rural cleavage, rather than a class-like cleavage. Cell 4 could also describe countries where levels of economic development are extremely low across *all* predominantly rural provinces. Pourtier (1980, 1989) writes that in Gabon under colonial rule, the regions were not territorially differentiated, either economically or politically. Economic development through the 1980s centered mostly on oil extraction in the capital city region and offshore.

<sup>12</sup> Rwanda since 1995 could also fit into Cell 3.

<sup>13</sup> These arguments pertain to mainland Tanzania. See Tordoff 1965; Morse 2014; Boone and Nyeme 2015; Mugizi and Pastory 2022. In Tanzania, economic policy has also played a role. See Chapters 3 and 4 and the conclusion to Chapter 6.