Map 0.1 Map of Africa
Prologue

Africa is home to more than 1.2 billion people, who speak around 3,000 languages by some estimates. There are fifty-four states recognized by the United Nations (UN). Most of them are on the continent; some are located on surrounding islands. There are territories that have been colonized or were run by a minority regime, territories that were not colonized, and territories that are still colonized. There are states that inherited a weak economy from the colonial powers and states that had a more solid economic base at independence. There are states that have very limited natural resources, states with some resources, and a few that have an abundance of natural resources. There are states with low, medium, and high levels of socioeconomic development. There are states in which external actors rarely interfere, states that witness occasional interference, and states in which external actors are so dominant that the local government is severely constrained. There are democratic, semidemocratic, and nondemocratic countries. There are states with functioning state institutions, states with semifunctioning state institutions, and there are failed states. There are internationally recognized functioning states, internationally recognized but factually nonexistent states, and internationally non-recognized but functioning states. There are states with neopatrimonial systems and states without them. There are states in which traditional leaders play a role and states in which they play none. There are states in which there has never been a coup d’état, states that experienced one coup (often some time back), and states in which coups regularly happen into the present. There are states that are unaffected by terrorism, states that suffer from terrorists’ attacks, and states in which terrorist groups recruit, train, and attack. There are states that have witnessed a civil war or other forms of large-scale violence and states in which people lived (and still live) in peaceful coexistence. In short, Africa – in this book comprising both North and Sub-Saharan Africa – is diverse in many respects. This diversity existed before the
European powers started colonizing vast parts of the continent, it existed during the colonial period, and it has existed from independence until today.

One could use other descriptions for a first portrayal of the political, economic, and socioeconomic situation in Africa than those above. Ultimately, exploring such a diverse continent is a question of perspective. My perspective of Africa has been shaped by a deep academic engagement with the continent: I examined numerous books and academic articles written by Africans and non-Africans, I regularly read newspapers and internet reporting in African and non-African outlets, and I saw numerous news and documentaries on TV produced by Africans and non-Africans. In addition, I often traveled there, sometimes for short periods, sometimes for longer, and I have spoken with citizens from all walks of life on countless occasions both on the continent and in the diaspora. Based on these engagements, then, this book presents my perspective on African history and politics. As always in social sciences, no one will entirely share my perspective or fully agree, for he or she may have read, heard, seen, or experienced something else. At the same time, no one will completely disagree with what I write. I have no qualms admitting that I am not an omniscient “expert” about “Africa” or that I am not in a position to do full justice to such a diverse continent on the 286 pages that lie in front of you. However, the reality is that even 1,000 pages or a more intensive academic and personal engagement with African history and politics would not have done justice to the rich history and complex politics of Africa (since decolonization) either. In effect, any academic work condenses reality, reduces complexity, and is bound by the zeitgeist. It follows that this book should not be seen as an ultimate and final assessment of African history and politics. Rather, it is my exploration and analysis of selected issues that I deem important from the perspective of a political scientist who is specialized in international relations and Africa and who has an interest in historic, economic, and socioeconomic questions. This book is my humble attempt as a non-African to write about African history and politics.

During my Masters at the London School of Economics and Political Science, I read a book chapter in which John Vincent summarized Hedley Bull’s legacy. By applying this academic legacy outside the research paradigm it stems from, as I consider it universally applicable, it became my guide for research, teaching, and writing. According to
Vincent, Bull’s four maxims were: “ask the big questions and get the big picture; be sceptical about every generalization, including this one; hold up every fashion to the mirror of history; and […] acknowledge the extent to which we are in the dark rather than pretending that we can see the light.”¹ I hope that my readers take these principles into account when engaging with this book. I invite them to form their own impressions and to make their own judgments on complex questions, suggesting that they deploy the same standard in doing so – and when judging my work. If we can agree on that, we are in a good position to avoid talking past each other as the intentions and the shortcomings of this book are clear from the onset.

Why Study African History and Politics?

On 23 June 2019, England was playing against Cameroon in the FIFA Women’s World Cup in the French town of Valenciennes. This football match will not so much be remembered for the sport but for the various incidences that occurred in the stadium, with the Cameroonian players feeling betrayed by the referee and with some of the decisions of the latter being framed as racist. As such, England’s first goal was initially ruled out but then the video assistant referee deemed that the striker had been onside. Journalists from Cameroon in the stands urged the Cameroonian players to protest and to end the game. The Cameroonian fans supported this call and indicated that they thought England had paid for the match’s results. The Cameroonian players again hesitated to continue after they thought they had shot a goal that the video assistant referee then annulled, as it was a tight offside. After the match, a Cameroonian midfielder said she was feeling as if she were participating in a European championship and that Africa was not welcome in it.² When confronted with the accusations, England’s coach said that he was a great fan of African football and that these incidences today were a single case; in his view, the players were very emotional on the pitch. In all their games, “[t]heir supporters were dancing and singing, that’s what the World Cup is all about. I love the joy they bring, dancing into the dressing rooms. You could feel their emotion and their hurt.”³ He also noted that Cameroonian football had improved and certainly has a bright future.

Only when we delve deeper into the colonial and postcolonial history as well as into the current political situation, and only when we
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place this history and contemporary political circumstances in world history and an analysis of today’s international system, will we be in a position to have a more fine-grained perspective of the events in Valenciennes and to grasp the underlying issues. Then we are able to see, on the one hand, the frustration of Africans – here Cameroon’s players and supporters – about continued marginalization and about a feeling of being treated unfairly and, on the other hand, the prejudice and stereotypes we hear from Europeans (or people in the West more broadly), in this case England’s coach when referring to the singing, dancing, and emotions of Africans with a paternalistic undertone. Two perspectives had clashed in Valenciennes and, in effect, both sides were talking past each other even though they were talking about the same match.

There are, of course, more reasons to study African history and politics and I shall mention three of them. First, African history and politics deserve more attention than they currently receive. This is because of and despite the argument so often made, that only major powers matter in international politics. As will be shown throughout this book, African actors are not bystanders in national and international politics but shape national and international politics, too. Thinking in such terms, books like Fernand Braudel’s *A History of Civilizations* appear misguided insofar as this work devotes 120 pages to European history, 76 pages to Islam and the Muslim world, 152 pages to the Far East, and 99 pages to the Americas, but only 37 pages to Sub-Saharan Africa. The same is true for the popular book *1000 Places to See Before You Die* that features 355 places in Europe, 171 in the USA alone, but only 67 in Africa. These are just two books, one academic and one popular, which stand for many.

An analysis of Western newspaper reporting similarly shows that Africa is underrepresented. Figure 0.1 shows a cartogram in which each country’s size is determined by the number of articles in the international edition of *The New York Times* for the entire year 2018 that mentions the country’s name. I counted the number of articles for every given country irrespective of the content of the given article. To provide other countries a chance to be seen, the size of the square that represents the USA is just a quarter of its actual size. A few countries were not mentioned by *The New York Times* in 2018 (in Africa, it was Lesotho) and thus these countries do not appear in the figure.
However, it is not only that Western media report less about African affairs as compared to other world regions, but also that online readers, who have much choice in selecting the articles they are reading, also engage less with news from Africa. *The Economist* reported that readers spent much less time reading about Robert Mugabe and the military takeover in Zimbabwe in 2017 than about Harvey Weinstein or Prince Harry’s engagement to Meghan Markle. While there was discernible readership on the elections in Britain, France, and Germany in 2017, only a few people spent time reading about the elections in Kenya in the same year – even though they were no less interesting given the history of past elections in the country. And, while the situation in Somalia in 2017 earned some attention when it came to interests in conflicts and conflict management, online readers spent significantly more time reading about Afghanistan, the Islamic State, Syria, and Yemen.

A second reason to study African history and politics is about coming to terms with two extremes: On the one hand, there is talk about “hopeless,” “failing,” or even “failed” African states and “Africa” more broadly, a continent that is thought to be going nowhere or that poses a threat given amongst others the population growth and migration. On the other hand, there is talk about “Africa’s rise” or even “Afrotopia.” These are all intricate generalizations, and we should be skeptical about them inasmuch as they gloss over the

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*Figure 0.1 The world as mentioned in *The New York Times* (international edition) in 2018*

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complex dynamics in Africa and the continent’s political, economic, and socioeconomic diversity. I propose that we avoid conflating analysis and judgment with normative or wishful thinking – or with a pessimistic or paternalistic approach. We should instead undertake an analysis in the Weberian sense, free of value judgments and without making a final judgment, as this would not do justice to the diversity and complexity of Africa.

Third, in a globalized world, events in one corner of the world are perceptible in other corners. The Arab Spring of 2011 and the rising number of migrants in Europe and elsewhere are just two examples of this, as are the migrants fleeing from the Eritrean regime or from Somalia to other continents. The same is true for some terrorists who originate from Africa. Rising or falling oil prices might be due to conflicts, or their conclusion, in oil-exporting African states. And almost every mobile phone contains a metal, namely cobalt, originating from Congo-Kinshasa. Looking beyond such prominent cases, we also find, for example, that the Egyptian way to play croquet, which is more interesting to play and watch in the eyes of many, was adopted in other places so that this version of the game is now the most popular one. What is more, South African surgeons were not only the first to transplant a heart in 1967 but also in 2015 the first to transplant the male organ – that worked effectively. In short, there is ample proof inter alia with regard to resources, science, culture, and sports that show that Africa and Africans have global significance.

**Aims of the Book**

This book explains the complexity and diversity of past and contemporary politics in Africa broadly and might spark an interest to follow and further study African affairs. It is not an all-encompassing analysis of the fifty-four (or so) countries and their history since they achieved independence or overcame minority rule. And readers should be aware that they will not know “Africa” after having read the book; rather, they will have acquired a first impression, gained more knowledge, or learned a new perspective. I will also not provide solutions to any of the challenges identified in this book, nor will I make any predictions about the future. Even though Max Weber would allow a scientist to make a judgment after the analysis as well as take and promote his/her
own position, I will refrain from doing so herein.12 Instead, I will pose some questions at the end of the book for further consideration.

A Short Preview

This book comprises twelve thematic chapters. Chapters 1–6 are more devoted to exploring the “big picture,” meaning that I embed events in Africa in a global history and an analysis of the contemporary political and economic situation. Chapters 7–12 are different insofar as I delve deeper into African politics by providing more case studies, thereby examining the internal functioning of African states as well as cooperation, crises, and conflicts within and among them, as well as their ability to influence global politics. These would not be understandable without the descriptions in Chapters 1–6.

Despite my focus on the period after decolonization, we need to inquire into the precolonial era and the colonial time before turning to the actual topic of the book. This is due to two reasons: first, to highlight that Africa had a rich history prior to colonization and was certainly not a “dark continent.” Secondly, because there are some path dependencies at work, that is to say, past events in Africa shape the present. We need, for instance, to see how the colonial powers administered their African colonies to be in a better position to understand postcolonial politics and the current economic situation. And we need to take the rich precolonial history into account to understand why there is talk of an African Renaissance13 and why today’s postcolonial writers are able to link their works to that period. To this end, Chapter 1 provides a short introduction into the precolonial era, the “Scramble for Africa,” and the colonial period.

The colonial time and decolonization have been described as a watershed in Africa’s history. The European colonial powers took control of all but two countries, Liberia and Ethiopia. During a period of several decades these colonies reached independence, peaking in 1960, the “African year,” when eighteen colonies became independent. Chapter 2 identifies and describes the forces that played a role in making African states nominally independent, that is, recognized by other states and the UN. I analyze decolonization from three perspectives: that of the colonial powers, of the colonial state, and of the international system, demonstrating that only those three perspectives together allow us to understand decolonization in its complexity.
Chapter 3 continues by exploring the legacies of the colonial period and decolonization along three fields: political and economic legacies as well as consequences for Africans themselves. Among other things, it shows how ill-prepared the colonial powers left their colonies in political and economic terms and that most postcolonial leaders took over the colonial states without altering them. The chapter reveals how rare fertile ground for state-building, democratization, socioeconomic development, and economic freedom was at the time of independence.

One of the recurring themes of this book is interference from non-African actors into African affairs. Chapter 4 is explicitly devoted to this theme and scrutinizes the interference of the (former) colonial powers, the Cold War superpowers, as well as today’s major and rising powers in African affairs. The core themes, in chronological order, are the interferences during the Cold War, during the 1990s when a liberal-cosmopolitan order was promoted, the period after 9/11 with the US-led “war on terror,” and the “New Scramble for Africa,” concentrating on the role of China.

Chapters 5 and 6 address the economic and socioeconomic development of the continent. Whereas Chapter 5 deals with the time span between decolonization and the year 2000, touching on various initiatives to tackle the identified socioeconomic challenges of several African states, Chapter 6 is concerned with the time after 2000 when the rise of China and its interests in Africa opened a new scramble for Africa. Chapter 5 will show that the ideology-laden debates during the Cold War made a collective strategy to boost the economies impossible and that African and non-African actors were talking past each other for they had no common perspective on the causes of the socioeconomic misery that prevailed in several (but not all) African countries. Chapter 6 then examines contemporary challenges and success stories by emphasizing the diversification of trading partners and, in that context, the role of China and other emerging powers. While one can observe more trade, more trading partners, more consumption, and more foreign direct investment, these changes do not reach all African states.

The political landscape in Africa is diverse and Chapter 7, the longest chapter in this book, investigates the details. It addresses topics like the nature of the state, “Big Men” politics, neopatrimonialism, strategies for staying in power, and democratization – to name a few. Besides the focus on the presidency, this chapter discusses the roles of
other actors, including cabinets, public administrations, parliaments, political parties, militaries, judiciaries, traditional leaders, and churches as well as nongovernmental organizations.

Chapter 8 is concerned with intra-African cooperation, highlighting those intergovernmental organizations meant to integrate African states politically, economically, and socially. In this chapter, I will show the rationales behind the establishment of such bodies as the Organization of African Unity, its successor, the African Union, and regional economic communities like the Economic Community of West African States. Moreover, I will explore the normative basis of these projects, the political profit, as well as the obstacles toward a deeper integration both from the standpoint of history and contemporary challenges.

Chapters 9 and 10 deal with crises and large-scale conflicts. Specifically, Chapter 9 investigates political crises, namely secession (attempts), coups d’état, electoral violence, and terrorism. I deliberate on the rationales and drivers of these types of crises, and emphasize at the same time that while there is a perception of a continent suffering from endless crises, these have in fact not at all reached every African country but are often local and temporary phenomena that even date back some time. Chapter 10 then turns to large-scale violence and conflicts. It explains the absence of interstate wars and the reasons for intrastate wars while also not forgetting to mention that several African countries have never experienced such large-scale violence. I also address the question of why people choose to become rebels. The chapter then turns to genocides as a special form of large-scale conflicts, exploring the genocides in Darfur and Rwanda. Given its scale and the up to five million dead, “Africa’s Great War” or “World War III” merits a separate analysis. Here I am referring to a war complex in the Great Lake region that blurred the line between inter- and intrastate conflict. Finally, I will explore the situation in refugee camps since they serve both as shelters and as recruiting places.

Thereafter, Chapter 11 examines international conflict management and introduces the various actors involved in this field. It asks what conditions have to be met to conduct international conflict management successfully; to this end, it first asks what “successful” might mean. The analysis underlines that there are neither simple problems nor simple solutions but that conflict management is a truly complex affair demanding many trade-offs and hard choices.
It emerges from this book that African actors are not passive or bystanders. Rather, throughout history they have shaped their own polities and policies as well as influenced polities and policies in the rest of the world. Chapter 12 specifically turns to this issue and asks what role African actors play in international politics. I explore the means that African actors can use to impact international politics as well as the obstacles they face. The Epilogue then raises some questions derived from the preceding chapters and provides some food for thought.

This overview shows that the book is structured along selected themes. It is, of course, possible to read only individual chapters insofar as they largely stand for themselves. They contain references to other chapters to show the links between the topics and to guide readers. References within chapters are marked with “see above” or “see below.” Nonetheless, like other authors, I would appreciate if the book is read in its entirety to grasp the full perspective that I lay out. As this book is fully referenced, I have not included sections of suggested or further readings. The notes at the end provide an abundance of suggestions for a deeper engagement with any topic discussed in the pages that follow.

With that, let me stop writing about the background to the book and its technical details and ask you to turn the page to get down to business.