

## **African Political Economy and the United States of America: From the Carter Presidency to the Trump Administration**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The political economy of Africa remains tangibly troubled. The African continent has indeed never in these unstable circumstances professed possession of an independent capacity to save itself. Governments and peoples of Africa have accordingly remained receptive of intercontinental cooperation and extra African benefaction, either on state-centric bases or in their individual relations with worldwide organizations and other innumerable donor agencies. Beginning from the 1970s, the United States of America (USA) has been forthcoming in these intercourses that principally border on the political economy of Africa, particularly since the Jimmy Carter presidency. There were however, growing concerns that the African political economy was experiencing waning interest and diminishing backing from the USA, under the Donald Trump administration. This paper interrogated this uneasiness over African political economy and the United States of America (USA) particularly in the Trumpian era. The principal research question of the submission therefore revolved around the nature of the relationship between African political economy and the US, from the Carter presidency to the Trump administration. The contribution is invariably framed on the political economy theory while deploying logical argumentation as methodology.*

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**KEYWORDS:** *Political economy, African political economy, Africa-America relations, Trump administration, Political economy of Africa*

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### **Introduction**

The United States of America (USA) has historically played leading roles in shaping international relations, for better or worse (Mangu, 2013). The attitude of every American administration to the different regions of the world accordingly remains entitled to significant attention. The political economy of these regions is usually critical to the anticipated United States' relations. In the case of Africa, the continental political economy has remained tangibly troubled (Lemarchand, 1992; Swyngedouw, 2009; Giovannetti, 2019). Beginning from the 1970s, the US has been forthcoming (for better or worse) in the Africa-America questions that principally border on the political economy of Africa. Even President Ronald Reagan's contentious Constructive Engagement in Apartheid South Africa was essentially a political economy position. It principally centered on economic sanctions and divestments from South Africa, and their oppositions (Clough, 1985; Ungar & Vale, 1985). Subsequently, the apartheid regime came to an end under the presidency of George H. W. Bush, the failure of the embedded isolationism not necessarily attributable to any strident contributions by this particular (Bush) administration (Harlow, 2011).

William Jefferson Clinton enters these configurations as President of the United States (1993-2001) with development diplomacy ultimately characterizing his American-Africa focus, recording faltered steps in the initial days of the administration (Banjo, 2010). George W. Bush as president of the US (2001-2009) then led the drive for the G-8 countries to press for multi-lateral debt relief initiative (MDRI), inspiring the World Bank, IMF and the U.S. itself, to lessen the debt burden of the endemic-debtor countries (consisting significantly of African nations). The George W. Bush administration in 2004 also succeeded in passing reforms which converted poor-nation-debts into grants (Kimenyi & Smith, 2011). Then under the Barack Obama administration there were remarkable Africa-America political economy relations in the areas of Doing Business in Africa (DBIA), the Power Africa project and the Trade Africa initiative (all launched between 2012 and 2013) among others (The White House, 2016).

In the Trumpian period therefore, what shapes did relations between Africa and America take, in the political economy regards? This was a central research question of this paper. The significance of the contribution is locatable in the position that despite the increasing phenomenon of rising powers in global affairs, America remains a dominant nation in international relations (Kennedy & Lim, 2018). The tendencies of this dominant country thus, continue to demand scholarly attention. This contribution is also framed on the supposition that political economy is central to international relations. But what is political economy? The expressive concept of political economy is imbued with divergent meanings, necessitating in this submission a conceptual elucidation. In this work therefore, political economy is a genre of the social sciences. It refers to the relationships between politics and economics and as scientific investigation, interrogates the influence of politics on the economy, and presents the results of such relations (Sodaro, 2001; Dode, 2012; Okeke, 2017).

### **The Character of Africa's Political Economy**

Africa's political economy is actually troubled. The surrounding issues are also leadership questions. Africa holds around 30% of the known mineral reserves of the world (Lebert, 2015). But leadership is requisite in converting these natural endowments into further economic treasures. Around 640 million people in Africa currently live without electricity (210 million of which are in conflict-affected and fragile nations). Public debt levels and debt risk have continued to rise in the African region of the world. As this scenario jeopardizes debt

sustainability in some states, the number of entrants in the continental labor force immensely outweighs the availability of good jobs. More than 416 million people in Africa still exist in extreme poverty (The World Bank, 2020). The conflict-affected and fragile states are thrown into such cataclysms by perennially confrontational and inept leaderships. There is a relationship of positive impact between military spending and external debt in Africa. The high level of external debts in the region invariably affects economic performance negatively (Dunne, Nikolaidou & Chiminya, 2019). The huge degree of military spending is a function of the perennial conflicts on the continent. The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) then highlights as follows:

There were at least 15 countries with active armed conflicts in sub-Saharan Africa in 2019: Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cameroon, the Central African Republic (CAR), Chad, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Ethiopia, Kenya, Mali, Mozambique, Niger, Nigeria, Somalia, South Sudan and Sudan. Eight were low-intensity, subnational armed conflicts, and seven were high-intensity armed conflicts (Nigeria, Somalia, the DRC, Burkina Faso, Mali, South Sudan and Cameroon) (SIPRI, 2020).

The dynamics of these conflicts are often interwoven with religious and ethnic tensions, and usually also rooted in a combination of factors encompassing state weakness, competition over natural resources, relative deprivation, inequality, corruption and ineffective delivery of fundamental state services (SIPRI, 2020). In other words, the changing aspects of the conflicts border basically on political leadership issues. In the interim, African countries do not usually feature in the list of top 20 economies in the world (Silver, 2020). Because of the aid disruption and rising food prices associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, millions of refugees across the African continent are currently confronted by gargantuan food insecurity (UN News, 2020). African political leaders sometimes appear unprepared for the onerous tasks of empirically relating politics to the economic wellbeing of their continental compatriots. A contradictory dimension to these issues is that while the international rating agencies and other organizations such as the United Nations maybe predicting superlative performance for the African economies, citizens of the region continue to experience hardships and deprivations occasioned by comparatively incompetent political leadership.

The two largest economies in Africa today are the Nigerian and South African economies, respectively (as first and second largest economies) with the two nations accounting for nearly half of sub-Saharan Africa's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (Naidoo, 2020). But the incessant xenophobic attacks against fellow Africans in South Africa is also recurrently attributed to poverty, unemployment, inadequate or complete lack of efficiency in service delivery (Alexander, 2010; Choane, Shulika & Mthombeni, 2011; Akinola, 2018; Dauda, Sakariyau & Ameen, 2018; Breakfast, Bradshaw & Nomarwayi, 2019). Then Nigeria's case is a clear paradox of poverty and abundance coexisting in an ambience of abject dearth of developmental infrastructure (Kabiru, 2016; Okorie & Anowor, 2017; Ebhota & Tabakov, 2018; Ajide, 2019). That these two states are also the leading economies in the region evidences the case of a disordered continental political economy.

### **Historicizing the Political Economy of Africa in the Context of Africa-America Relations**

Africa's economy was aboriginally diversified, and framed on widespread trade routes which existed between the region's cities and kingdoms. Some of the trade routes were on land; some entailed navigating the rivers, as others accordingly evolved around port cities. The important African empires were therefore actually wealthy on the account of their trade-networks. These included the ancient Egyptian empire, the Ashanti, Mali, Nubia, Oyo and Songhai empires (Kopytoff, 1987; Andrews, 2017; Forde & Kaberry, 2018). Subsequent contact with Europe and the colonial interests which ensued led to the emergence of new dimensions in production and commerce, driven by European desires and tastes for commodities such as palm oil, cotton, cash crops, spices, rubber, precious metals and other goods. These new trade relations particularly integrated the coastal areas of the continent with the Atlantic economy (Acemoglu, Johnson & Robinson, 2005; Monroe & Janzen, 2014; Cappelli & Baten, 2017). Decolonization and its concomitant independence implied an assumption of African freedom in the trajectory of new trade and economic relations (with the other regions of the world). But neocolonialism entered, and economic neocolonialism was very central to this new form of Euro-African relations.

The post-World War II US had at this point become one of the two dominant world powers, with the defunct Soviet Union as the alter ego. Following the end of World War II, relations between the two foremost world powers were marked by the Cold War. It was a period of geopolitical mistrust and unease between the United States and the Soviet Union, supported by their respective allies (the Western Bloc and the Eastern Bloc) which expired with the 1991 dissolution of the Soviet Union. The terminology of "cold" is deployed in describing the "war" because there were actually no direct large-scale fights between the two global superpowers, although they each supported major regional conflicts in what was known as proxy wars. The inherent conflicts were based around geopolitical and ideological struggle for global influence by the two world powers, consequent upon their short-lived alliance and the resultant victory against Nazi Germany in 1945. But the Cold War cracked their wartime coalition, leaving the United States and the former Soviet Union (the two world powers) with deep political and economic misgivings (Higgs, 2006; Sempa, 2009; Blakemore, 2019).

The USSR, under a single-party Marxist-Leninist ideology operated a planned economy, owning exclusive right to establish and rule over communities, and the US operated a capitalist system with its embedded freedoms. In attempting to assert their newly obtained independence, the emergent African states adopted policies of non-alignment and invariably joined the Non-Aligned Movement, a group of 120 developing nations, not formally ranged with any of the two major power blocs in the world (Morphet, 2004; Munro, 2020). The member states wished to govern their countries outside the dictates of any of the existing superpowers in the world. But this focus might have served only ephemeral political purposes for the new African states, as their economic policies also became continentally conflicting, devoid of deep regional grounding. At the end of the Cold War therefore, the economies of Africa were still remarkably rearward. Africa was still described as a backward, nonperforming, poor and failing continent (Fwatshak 2014). The ostensible non-alignment of the African states has accordingly not served the causes of economic development for the region.

These inquisitions purposively continue from the presidency of Jimmy Carter which began on January 20, 1977, in the midst of the Cold War. President Carter's African focus was invariably driven by the zeal to prevent Soviet incursions into the continent. The role of the Carter administration was strategic in the transition of the formerly white-minority dominated Southern Rhodesia to black-majority ruled Zimbabwe. The principal policy person of the administration

on Africa was Andrew Young, who became Ambassador to the United Nations. Ambassador Young initiated and sustained friendly relationships with key African leaders, particularly in Nigeria (Smith, 1986; DeRoche, 2003; Mitchell, 2018). The economies of the African states were not covertly in the woods at this time. Then under the Ronald Reagan administration, the interests of the United States in checkmating Soviet influence in Africa was manifestly maintained. But in the area of covertly courting the friendship of African states, there was no continuity with the tendencies of the preceding administration. Essentially, the African political economy was not accorded priority in the policies of the Reagan government (Ravenhill, & Rothchild, 1982).

Preparatory to the dismantling of the apartheid system of government, the US under President H.W. Bush was the first to remove sanctions against the white-minority-ruled South Africa. Apartheid became dissolved because President F.W. de Klerk came to the conclusion that the country could not progress as an industrial nation, devoid of the full political and economic involvement of the majority black citizens (Lauter, 1990; Cohen, 2018). Despite some existing expansion challenges, the South African economy is the second largest in today's Africa (Naidoo, 2020). Every democracy is marked by tasks and trials and the South African democracy is not immune to these features. In spite of such democratic tests being prevalent in the country therefore, the post-apartheid inclusive government has not unraveled (Lieberman, 2019; Brooks, 2020; Brooks, Ngwane & Runciman, 2020). But the political economy of the entire Africa had at this time began to exhibit immense symptoms of defectiveness and inadequacies. There were military regimes in Algeria, Burkina Faso, Egypt, Ghana, Lesotho, Liberia, Libya, Nigeria, Sudan, and Tunisia. Some other states within and outside the sub-Saharan African classification were also being governed by military juntas, the members of which were never superlative managers of state resources.

The political economy of Africa then became purely characterized by crises. The panaceas as recommended by multilateral agencies (and in scholarly interventions) were structural adjustments and democratization (Bangura, 1994; Kennedy, 1994; Rapley, 1994; Tshuma, 1999). The position of the US as a needed party in African affairs then became more distinct and unmistakable. Consequently, more than any previous President of the United States, Bill Clinton visited several countries in sub-Saharan Africa, including Ghana, Rwanda, Uganda, Botswana, South Africa, Senegal, Tanzania and Nigeria (U.S. Department of State, n.da). The Clinton period thus witnessed some exceptional top-level engagement in Africa and the enunciation of ideas of cooperation framed on consultation and bold policy initiatives (Morrison & J. G. Cooke, 2001). The African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) was signed into law by President Clinton on May 18, 2000. The AGOA which has since been renewed to 2025 fundamentally aims at improving market access to the United States for qualifying Sub-Saharan African nations (Banjo, 2010; AGOA.info, 2020).

During the presidency of George W. Bush (2001-2009) Sub-Saharan Africa was massively enmeshed in external debt crisis, which became the single largest impediment to the region's economic development (Omotola & Saliu, 2009; Banjo, 2010). According to Omotola & Saliu these debts arose from years of military despotism and external collusion in Africa as available figures indicated that from 1970 to 2002, Africa obtained a total of \$540 billion in loans and repaid \$550 billion - \$10 billion in excess of the original facilities in the same period. Yet, Africa's external loan burden stood at \$293 billion at the end of 2002. This implied profound adverse impact on the continental political economy. Besides the debt service payments

consuming large chunks of foreign exchange earnings, they also acted to push down investment, and decrease the rate of economic growth (a result of the effect of debt overhang) leading to acute poverty and loss of faith in leadership (Ajayi & Khan, 2000; Okonjo-Iweala, Soludo & Muhtar, 2003; Mbaku & Saxena, 2004; Obadan, 2004; Omotola & Salu, 2009).

George W. Bush also made several visits to Sub-Saharan Africa, visiting Benin, Botswana, Senegal, South Africa, Uganda, Nigeria, Tanzania, Rwanda, Ghana and Liberia (U.S. Department of State, n.db). It has accordingly been suggested that America's African foreign policy during the Bush administration was guided by dual strategies: the spread of democracy, good governance and development on one hand, and the protection and promotion of America's national interest on the other hand. A visible manifestation of the US foreign policy influence in Africa at this time was through development assistance from which 47 countries benefited (mainly via the work of USAID)(Tsegaye, 2011). Under the presidency of George Bush, the mechanisms of AGOA were further strengthened as the legislative amendment of the Act was signed into law by President Bush in July 2004, extending the life of the policy to 2015(Tsegaye, 2011; AGOA.info, 2020).

Even after some initial reluctance, the U.S. at the G8 summit in 2005 led efforts to obtain group approval of the Multilateral Debt Relief Initiative (MDRI). This proposal called for the total cancellation of heavily indebted poor countries' (HIPC's) eligible debt commitments to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank and the African Development Bank (ADB). These debtor-nations were mainly African states (U.S. Department of State, 2008). President Bush also deployed foreign aid as a major instrument of promoting development abroad, which the administration considered as key priority in U.S. foreign policy. The level of U.S. aid accordingly grew markedly during the Bush administration. An entirely new aid agency - the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) was established. As at November 2007, African countries that had signed compacts with the MCC (with the pacts at various levels of implementation) included Benin, Cape Verde, Ghana, Lesotho, Madagascar, Mali, Morocco and Mozambique (Lancaster, 2008).

The Barack Obama administration (2009-2017) was actually insufficiently engaged on Africa in its first term and failed to make an ample case for US continued relevance in parts of the African continent. President Obama was thus accused of lack of imagination and incapacity to accord high-profile attention to African affairs, as his single trip to sub-Saharan Africa was only a brief stopover in Ghana. This was contrary to the previous administration's notable formulations of U.S. policy toward the entire continent (Sethi, 2014; Downie, 2015). President Obama's only extensive tour of Africa came as delayed as 2013; a three-state tour of Tanzania, South Africa and Senegal (Sethi, 2014). Obama, although never totally disregarded African-American relations in his first term. At the UN General Assembly in September 2009, President Obama hosted a lunch for 26 African Heads of State and deliberated on mutual issues with the African leaders (Mululek, 2014). But in the second segment of the presidency of Obama, US attention to sub-Saharan Africa became noticeably increased. Under this period of the Obama administration therefore, the first U.S-Africa summit attended by the leaders of 51 African states took place in Washington DC in August 2014 and featured the first U.S-Africa Business Forum in its agenda (Gorodnia, 2017).

In July 2015, the new tempo of increased attention to political relations with Africa was sustained by President Obama. There was the meeting in Washington with Nigeria's new President Muhammadu Buhari, followed by visits to Kenya and Ethiopia (Downie (2015).

Attendant to the unprecedented US-Africa Leaders' summit hosted by President Obama, there arose in USA's Africa policy a more assenting focus on the strengthening of economic and commercial relations between the US and African nations. The three prongs of the summit initiatives were the Young African Leaders programme, Trade Africa and Power Africa. The Young African Leaders Initiative was aimed at providing internships to young Africans at public institutions and companies. Trade Africa focused on East Africa's economic development, while Power Africa aimed at improving Africa's electric grid. The summit further signified a major change in US-Africa relations from a state-centric relationship to a private sector-driven type (Sethi, 2014).

However, despite the self-evident improvements in US-Africa political economy relations, under the Obama administration, the American economic footing on the continent remained quite behind. This is when compared with the tendencies of the other countries indicating continuing interests in engaging with the African region. For example, while the intentions and outcome of the preliminary US-Africa Summit were being applauded, the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) (launched in 2000) had already recorded five high-profile meetings, covering four ministerial level conferences and a heads of government summit (Sethi, 2014; FOCAC, 2020). But still in the accurate African political economy contexts of this contribution and the embedded American benefaction, there arises a contentious issue. It borders on what is the accomplishment for Africa in nearly all the leaders of the component states (some accounts give their number as fifty and others as fifty-one) trooping to a member state of the international community (in corporate attires) to be tutored on how to engender political-economy transformation of their continent?

### **The Trump Administration and the Political Economy of Africa**

The initial concerns that the growing anticipative relations between the US and Africa in the political economy regards would be dampened under a Trump presidency became increasingly established. A major indication of President Trump's attitude to Africa-America relations was in his unwillingness to pay a visit to the continent. Presidential visits are indications of friendly relations between two nations (Signé, 2019). Furthermore, at a meeting with some US lawmakers in the Oval Office (January 2018) President Trump dismissed Haiti, El Salvador and African nations as shithole countries (Dawsey, 2018). Despite Mr. Trump's denial of using those words, there were witnesses in the room of his meeting with the legislators who confirmed that the derogatory remarks were actually made by the American President (Mackey, 2008). Invariably, President Trump's attitude to the political economy of Africa points towards a net position of disregard. It was probably not coincidental therefore that the G-20 summit held July 7–8 in Hamburg, Germany, which President Donald Trump did not attend was among other issues, crucially on G-20's partnership with Africa (Daschle, 2017; Heger & Downie, 2017). Then in the Trump Administration's Africa Strategy finally released on December 13, 2018, the emphases were actually more on Mr. Trump's policy notion of "making America great again".

The Africa policy details were for instance, devoid of rhetoric bordering on putative big brother benevolence (Bolton, 2018). They succinctly pointed towards the anti-aid postures of the US government under Donald Trump. John Bolton, the then National Security Advisor concretely hinted(at the policy's unveiling) that a more strategic use of aid would be turned away from (African) nations that do not side with Washington's agenda (Owusu, Reboredo & Carmody, 2019).The Trump administration's Africa economic focus consequently remained

comparatively paltry. The administration inaugurated a \$50 million Women's Global Development and Prosperity Initiative, funded through USAID - the U.S. Agency for International Development. The aim of the initiative was to encourage women's employment in developing countries by empowering 50 million women through employment and economic stability by 2025. In April 2019, Ivanka Trump, Senior Advisor to the US President (her father actually) embarked on a four-day tour of Africa, which took her to Ethiopia and Côte d'Ivoire, to promote the objectives of the policy (Gemechu, Holland & Smith, 2019). But evidence of a sustained attention to this programme remained largely lacking.

Furthermore in the Trump Administration's Africa Strategy announced by John Bolton, there was a Prosper Africa initiative aimed at harmonizing US Government's assets and wherewithal towards unlocking the prospects of doing business in the African continent (as a mutually beneficial relationship for America and Africa). The policy nomenclature of Prosper Africa was however ironic. The latent policy intentions and field efforts of the initiative indicated that it was crafted within the contexts of President Trump's designs of "making America great again" (Signé & Olander, 2019; USAID, 2020). Along similar lines of new American predispositions, the Trump administration sort to dictate who emerged President of the African Development Bank (AfDB) where incumbent President, Nigeria's Akinwumi Adesina was to be reelected in August, 2020. US Treasury Secretary, Steve Mnuchin personally signed a letter to the board of the bank where United States remained the second largest shareholder, vehemently rejecting an internal investigation which cleared Mr Adesina of all allegations of improprieties. The Trump administration's position however ran against the tide of enormous support that the subsequently reelected AfDB President was receiving in Africa and elsewhere among the bank's stockholders (Madowo, 2020). US refused to believe that the allegations against Adesina bordered on pre-election intrigues by the candidate's weak opposition.

But the policy postures of the Trump administration on the political economy of Africa incidentally portended a message. It proclaimed that African countries must begin to spiritedly institute and strengthen sustainable regimes of good governance in their various countries. Good governance refers to clearly democratic and efficient systems of administration, devoid of corruption and opportunism (Akokpari, 2004; Mbaku & Saxena, 2004; Omotola & Saliu, 2009). Good governance will make African political leaders terminate the tendency to seek extra African benefaction as panacea to political economy emancipation of the region.

## **Conclusion**

In this contribution, political economy refers to the relationships between politics and economics, then as social science engagement examines the influence of politics on the economy and presents the results of such investigation(s). Africa's political economy is troubled, transiting from a position of aboriginal sophistication, extraneous influences and then to internally-inflicted wounds. Invariably, international matrixes subsequently led to the scenario of a needy continent which required extraterritorial benefaction. More than any other outlying party in African affairs, the US was in a position to offer backing to this struggling continent. US attention is purposively presented in this submission from the Carter Presidency (1977-1981) and ending with the incumbent Trump administration. The study investigated how the world superpower had participated in the provision of political-economy backup to a disadvantaged continental member of humanity. The waned benefaction of the US to the political economy of Africa in the Trump dispensation invariably challenged Africa to natively deliver itself from developmental lethargy.



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