

GOVERNANCE AND LEADERSHIP IN AFRICA: PROSPECTS AND CHALLENGES

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Abstract:

Governance and Leadership play key roles in shaping the trajectory of nations and Africa is no exception. The African continent with its rich cultural diversity, abundant natural resources, young and dynamic population, holds immense potential for growth and development. However, the effective implementation of governance structures and presence of competent and ethical leaders remain critical challenges for many African nations. The paper interrogates the challenges and prospects of governance in Africa, highlighting the opportunities for progress and the obstacles that need to be overcome. The paper highlights the importance of accountable and inclusive governance, the role of visionary leadership and the need for institutional reforms. It examines the impact of corruption, political instability and socio economic disparities in governance and leadership in Africa. By employing analytical method, the paper aims to provide insights into the complex landscape of governance and leadership in Africa and shed light in the path towards a prosperous and sustainable future for the continent.

Keywords: Governance, Leadership, Challenges, Prospects, and Philosophical principles

INTRODUCTION

Governance, peace and leadership are the fundamental pillars which shape the contemporary socio-political imagery of a country, organization or an institution. They are responsible for establishing the course, deciding what to achieve and how it should be done but according to Afegbaua, leadership is perhaps one of the most observed yet least understood phenomenon on earth (145). Indeed the relationship between governance and leadership is symbiotic; effective governance provides a context for leadership, but good leadership supports effective governance. Governance and leadership challenges and prospects is an issue of paramount concern in Africa. The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to examine governance and leadership challenges confronting African continent and to make necessary recommendations for way forward.

Historical Context

The historical foundations of the modern African state are deeply interwoven with European colonialism, and this origin has had lasting consequences for governance, legitimacy, and development across the continent. The colonial state was not conceived as an instrument for endogenous development or the welfare of African populations; rather, it was designed primarily to facilitate resource extraction, administrative control, and geopolitical advantage for European powers (Mamdani 105). This structural orientation created institutions that were externally accountable and coercive rather than internally responsive and developmental.

A defining moment in this process was the Berlin Conference, where European powers partitioned Africa with little regard for existing ethnic, cultural, or political realities. Artificial borders brought together diverse groups with distinct identities, histories, and governance systems into single political units, while in other cases, coherent societies were arbitrarily divided across multiple colonies ("Berlin"). This imposed territoriality disrupted pre-existing systems of governance and social cohesion, laying the groundwork for persistent internal tensions and contestations over state legitimacy.

Colonial administrations also entrenched a centralized and authoritarian model of governance. Institutions such as indirect rule, commonly associated with figures like Frederick Lugard, relied on co-opting traditional authorities into the colonial system. While this approach appeared to preserve indigenous structures, it often distorted them, transforming local leaders into agents of colonial power rather than representatives of their communities. As a result, the postcolonial state inherited governance systems that lacked organic legitimacy and were often perceived as instruments of domination rather than service.

At independence, many African leaders inherited these fragile institutional frameworks. Instead of fundamentally restructuring them, the urgency of nation-building and the pressures of maintaining territorial unity led to the continuation—and in some cases, intensification—of centralized authority. The state remained distant from the citizenry, and governance often took on a patrimonial character, where political power was used to distribute resources along ethnic, regional, or personal lines (Westad 94). This weakened the social contract and contributed to widespread distrust between citizens and the state.

The dynamics of the Cold War further compounded these challenges. African states became arenas for proxy competition between superpowers, notably the United States and the Soviet Union. Rather than supporting genuine development or democratic consolidation, external actors often prioritized ideological alignment and strategic interests. Regimes that aligned with either bloc received financial, military, and diplomatic support regardless of their governance quality or human rights records (Davidson 52). This external backing insulated many governments from domestic accountability, allowing authoritarian practices, corruption, and inefficiency to flourish.

Moreover, the geopolitical positioning of African states during the Cold War diverted attention and resources away from long-term development planning. Instead of focusing on building robust institutions, diversifying economies, and investing in human capital, many governments became preoccupied with regime survival and alignment within the global ideological divide. Conflicts in countries such as Angola and the Democratic Republic of Congo exemplify how Cold War rivalries exacerbated internal instability, undermining development efforts and weakening state structures (Davidson 55).

The cumulative effect of these historical processes is a persistent fragility in the state-citizen relationship across much of Africa. Many citizens continue to perceive the state as alien, extractive, or unresponsive, rather than as a legitimate and accountable provider of public goods. This perception is reinforced by governance

challenges such as corruption, weak institutions, and limited service delivery capacity. Consequently, efforts to promote development are often hindered by low levels of public trust and participation.

Summarily, the Eurocentric design of the African state, combined with the distortions introduced by Cold War geopolitics, has left a legacy of institutional weakness and legitimacy deficits. Understanding this historical context is essential for addressing contemporary governance challenges, as it highlights the need for reforms that prioritize inclusivity, accountability, and the reconstruction of the social contract between African states and their citizens. Some of the most teething complications on governance and leadership in Africa are highlighted below:

Conflict Trends

According to UNDP, there are a range of complex and widespread conflicts in Africa; power struggles/democratic challenges, ethnic/sectarian divisions, competition over natural resources, terrorism/violent extremism, border disputes/territorial claims, climate change/environmental degradation, youth unemployment/demographic pressure), external interference/proxy wars as well as the obstacles and dilemmas of post-conflict reconstruction. These are closely inter-related and demand an in-depth grasp of the distinctions to tackle underlying causes of conflict through sustainable peace and security in Africa ("World Bank"). These spiral of conflicts are caused by multiple factors as seen below.

The State- Society Gap

The notion of the state-society gap, as articulated by Mkandawire captures a persistent structural weakness in many African states: the limited organic linkage between governing institutions and the social forces they are meant to represent. This divide is not merely political but deeply economic and institutional, with far-reaching consequences. At its foundation, the gap reflects a pattern in which many African governments derive a significant portion of their revenues not from domestic taxation, but from external sources such as foreign aid, loans, and rents from natural resource extraction (e.g., oil, minerals)(565). Because taxation historically compels governments to negotiate, bargain, and remain accountable to citizens, the absence of a strong tax-based social contract weakens reciprocal obligations between the state and society. In such contexts according to Mkandawire, the state becomes less dependent on its citizens for survival and legitimacy, thereby reducing incentives for responsiveness, inclusion, and participatory governance.

This dynamic often produces what scholars describe as "rentier state" tendencies. Governments that rely heavily on oil revenues or mineral wealth—such as those seen in parts of sub-Saharan Africa—tend to prioritize control over resource flows rather than building broad-based developmental coalitions. As a result, political elites may focus on distributing rents to maintain power, rather than investing in public goods or fostering inclusive economic growth. This further widens the gap between the state and ordinary citizens (Mamdani 98). This scenario captures vividly and particularly the Nigerian state where leaders are more concern about state capture than governance widening the gap between the ordinary citizens.

Another important dimension of the state-society divide is institutional alienation. Many African states inherited administrative structures from colonial regimes that

were designed primarily for control and extraction rather than representation and service delivery. These institutions often remain distant, bureaucratic, and unresponsive to local realities. Consequently, citizens may perceive the state as an external imposition rather than a legitimate expression of collective will. This perception erodes trust in public institutions and weakens national cohesion.

The “attendant effects” of this disconnection are numerous and mutually reinforcing as shown below:

- **Weak legitimacy and trust deficits:** When citizens feel excluded from governance processes, they are less likely to trust state institutions. This can manifest in low electoral participation, resistance to state policies, or even civil unrest.
- **Poor service delivery:** Governments that are not closely linked to societal needs may fail to prioritize essential services such as healthcare, education, and infrastructure. Policies may be poorly designed or inadequately implemented due to lack of grassroots input.
- **Elite capture and corruption:** Limited accountability creates opportunities for political elites to appropriate public resources for private gain. Corruption becomes systemic, further alienating citizens.
- **Fragmented national identity:** In the absence of strong state–society integration, citizens may identify more with ethnic, regional, or religious groups than with the nation–state. This can intensify social divisions and conflict.
- **Dependence and vulnerability:** Overreliance on external funding and commodity exports exposes states to global market fluctuations and external political pressures, undermining sovereignty and long-term planning. To mitigate this ugly development of state–society gap needs supersonic intentional efforts to reconstruct the social contract. Such deliberate efforts includes strengthening domestic revenue systems (especially equitable taxation), promoting participatory governance, decentralizing power to bring government closer to the people and truly so, investing in inclusive development policies that reflect local needs and aspirations. In essence, the persistence of the state–society divide is both a symptom and a cause of governance challenges in Africa. Addressing it is central to building legitimate, accountable, and development-oriented states.

Ethnic Diversity

Africa's ethnic diversity is both one of its greatest social assets and one of its most complex governance challenges. With thousands of ethnic groups, languages, and cultural identities spread across the continent, the African state often encompasses multiple pre-colonial nations within a single political boundary. This diversity, while rich in cultural capital, has historically intersected with political, economic, and institutional weaknesses to produce tensions that complicate governance.

At a theoretical level, scholars such as Williams argue that ethnic diversity can generate collective action problems within nation–states. Where societies are highly fractionalized, it may become more difficult to build consensus on public goods provision, equitable resource distribution, and national identity. Competing ethnic loyalties may override civic nationalism, thereby weakening trust in state institutions and reducing citizens' willingness to support redistributive policies or comply with state authority (108). This dynamic is particularly pronounced in contexts where the state is perceived as being captured by a dominant ethnic group.

However, ethnic diversity in itself is not inherently problematic. In fact, it can serve as a powerful engine for innovation, resilience, and pluralism. Diverse societies often benefit from a wide range of perspectives, indigenous knowledge systems, and adaptive cultural practices. The challenge, therefore, lies not in diversity per se, but in how it is managed politically and institutionally. Where inclusive governance structures exist—ensuring fair representation, decentralization, and equitable access to resources—ethnic diversity can enhance social cohesion rather than undermine it (Davison 75). The historical roots of Africa's ethnic tensions are deeply embedded in colonial state formation. Colonial powers arbitrarily grouped diverse ethnic communities into single administrative units without regard for pre-existing political or cultural boundaries. This artificial state construction disrupted traditional systems of governance and inter-group relations, often privileging certain groups over others for administrative convenience. Such practices institutionalized inequality and sowed seeds of mistrust that have persisted into the post-colonial era. Consequently, many African states inherited fragile national identities and deeply politicised ethnic divisions as we are experiencing in Nigeria today.

In conclusion, Africa's ethnic diversity presents a dual reality. On one hand, it offers immense cultural richness and potential for social innovation; on the other, it poses significant governance challenges when mismanaged. As Williams suggests, diversity becomes problematic primarily in the absence of strong, inclusive institutions. Therefore, the panacea to transforming ethnic diversity from a source of conflict into a driver of development lies in building equitable governance systems, fostering national identity, and promoting inclusive political participation that transcends ethnic boundaries (96).

Leadership Challenge

Leadership is one of the most broadly contested phenomena in the social sciences. Reason been that over centuries there have been scholarly contestation or engagement, yet, there is no univocal definition of leadership, reflecting its complexity, multidimensionality, and contextual variability (Benmira and Agboola 4; Gutterman 76). At its rudimentary level, leadership is commonly defined and described as a process of influence such that an individual or group guides others towards the attainment of shared goals. This influence -based description has enjoyed wide acceptance across disciplines, echoing that leadership is not merely about authority or position but about the capacity to influence and inspire followers (Northouse 112).

Interestingly, Philosophers of ancient and modern times have addressed the concept of leadership of in their literature. Plato for instance sees leadership as wisdom. He thought that a leader should be philosopher king, who has wisdom and knowledge to do what is best for the people. According to Aristotle, leadership is a virtue and the most important determinant of being a leader is character, ethics and moral excellence. Sulkowski present a multiplicity of philosophical conceptualization of leadership. According to Immanuel Kant, leadership constitutes a form of moral authority that guides others through reason. In his formulation of the categorical imperative, especially the formula of universal law, Kant contends that one ought to act only on that maxim which one can simultaneously will to become a universal law. For George Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, leadership is understood as a historical progression. He perceives leaders as agents of historical development who reconcile societal contradictions and advance the cause of human freedom. John Dewey conceptualizes

leadership as collective problem-solving, a definition that touches or underscores its relation to collaborative activity, democratic engagement, the resolution of shared concerns. Hannah Arendt focuses on leadership as a political action, regarding the leader as a mediator of public discourse and collective decision-making. Foucault interprets leadership through the lens of power relations, emphasizing the dynamic interplay between leaders and followers (Sulkowski et al. 25)

According to Amartya Sen, leadership is providing opportunity for the enhancement of capabilities of people for them to be free and enjoy well-being. We could continue in this vein indefinitely, but at least as far as philosophical definitions are concerned, we do get around when we talk about leadership: from wisdom to virtue, power to morality, creativity to historical progress, collaboration to political action, a power struggle or the expansion of what one can achieve. Lack of leadership challenge is also a point on the African soil because most African leaders do not possess charismatic potentials to be able to formulate reasonable policies and most of them lack discipline, training and attitudes enough to lead their people successfully. It is not surprising from the forgoing that corruption, favoritism and despotism constitute serious impediments to good governance, prosperity and sustainable development in Africa

Eurocentrism

Eurocentrism is a school of thought that places Europe and western epistemologies at the very center of knowledge production, cultural evaluation, and all manner of models of development, brandishing them as universal template for humanity. Within this debilitating framework, European historical experiences, political institutions and philosophical traditions are treated as normative, while non-Western tradition particularly are dismissed with a cavalier wave of hands as inferior and anachronistic. Sadly, this epistemic orientation has had negative implications for African leadership, governance structures and above all, institutional development. Eurocentrism challenges the Leadership in Africa when a discriminatory preference for European cultural and intellectual traditions threatens practically every aspect of life-governance, religion, and culture-in Africa as further highlighted below

Eurocentrism functions as an "epistemic violence" that marginalizes non-Western ways of knowing. By positioning the European experience as the universal standard, African governance models are often judged not by their efficacy, but by their proximity to Western liberal ideals (Ndlovu 88). This creates a "coloniality of power" where, despite formal independence, the structures of knowledge and authority remain tethered to former colonial centers.

i. The Imposition of Foreign Values and Cultural Erasure

The adoption of Western bureaucratic models often occurs at the expense of indigenous political systems, such as the *Ubuntu* philosophy or traditional palaver trees, which emphasize consensus and community over Western individualism. When foreign values are imposed, a "clash of institutional cultures" occurs. According to Ekeh's theory of the "Two Publics," many Africans feel a sense of moral duty toward their "primordial public" (ethnic/community groups) but feel no such obligation to the "civic public" (the Western-style state), leading to systemic inefficiency and what is often misidentified simply as corruption.(95)

ii. Neocolonialism and the Dependency Trap

Eurocentrism sustains neocolonialism by framing development as a process of "catching up" to the West. Amin in his work remarks that this mindset facilitates a reliance on the Bretton Woods institutions (the IMF and World Bank). He further argues that this creates a cycle of "extraversion," where African economies are designed to serve external markets rather than internal needs (95). According to Moyo, this dependence on foreign aid and "Exogenous Solutions" undermines local innovation, as policy-making is often outsourced to foreign consultants who lack context-specific knowledge (41).

iii. Corruption and the Erosion of Accountability

As noted by Transparency International corruption remains a primary barrier. However, this is exacerbated by the lack of "institutional independence" mentioned by the World Bank, in many African states, the executive branch exerts undue influence over the judiciary and the legislature. Without a functional system of checks and balances, public resources are diverted from "urgent public needs" like healthcare and education to private interests (World Bank).

iv. Marginal Representation and the Elite Bias

Eurocentric governance models in Africa often prioritize "western-educated elites," creating a glass ceiling for traditional leaders, women, and grassroots movements. This lack of inclusivity means that the "diverse perspectives" necessary for holistic development are ignored. Research suggests that when local governance ignores traditional authorities—who often hold higher levels of trust among the populace—the state struggles to maintain law and order (Logan 360).

v. Constraints to Sustainable Economic Development

The World Bank highlights several structural bottlenecks that prevent Africa from achieving its economic potential:

- **Infrastructure Deficits:** A "pervasive lack of access to basic services" such as electricity and digital technology creates a digital divide that hampers participation in the global Fourth Industrial Revolution.
- **Natural Resource Trap:** An "over-dependence on natural resources" leads to "Dutch Disease," where the volatility of commodity prices prevents economic diversification and leaves the continent vulnerable to global shocks.
- **Human Capital Crisis:** The lack of access to "quality education and health care" prevents the development of a workforce capable of driving internal innovation

To mitigate the negative effects of Eurocentrism, African nations must undergo a process of "epistemic decolonization." This involves retrieving indigenous knowledge and integrating it into modern governance structures. Only by shifting from "passive recipients" to "agents in their own right" can African leaders build institutions that are both accountable to their people and resilient to external pressures.

Political Apathy

Political passiveness is characterized by limited interest in or indifference to politics, including voter passiveness, information passivity and not being interested in elections, political events and public meetings and voting (en.wikipedia.org)

From a philosophical point of view, political indifference can be diagnosed as both moral and civic failure destroying the pillars of democratic society. The case against political indifference on the African continent is constructed as follows:

- a. **Civic Duty:** the voices of political apathy allow others to decide what kind of society will be formed, failing to meet the bare minimum demands of democratic participation,
- b. **Abdication of Moral Responsibility:** When they disengage from politics, people abdicate their moral responsibility to work for the common good and justice.
- c. **Social contract:** Political indifference breaches the social contract, whereby citizens are expected to get involved in activities of the State in return for security and services it provides.
- d. **Erosion of Democracy:** widespread political indifference can result in the erosion of democracy where uncontrolled power becomes concentrated in a few rulers weakening representative government.
- e. **Disenfranchisement:** Politics of inactivity may sustain systems that are unfair because minority groups become more disenfranchised as those who can fight for their rights withdraw from positive political action.
- g. **Epistemic Arrogance:** Political indifference presupposes a knowledge and opinion adequacy, belittling the contribution of collectivity reasoning and shared wisdom.
- h. **Democratic Citizenship:** Apathetic attitude to politics stands against the spirit of democratic citizenship which demands active participation, critical judgment and civic duty.

Other thinkers such as Aristotle, Rawls and Rousseau would probably be of the opinion that this cancerous attitude stipulates dereliction of moral responsibilities and abdication of social contracts they believe sustain democratic society; but by deconstructing how we have defined political apathy, there is an opportunity to rejuvenate value for active citizenship and quest for a fairer society in a democracy so minute portion meets political aspirations in African nations (World bank 67).

Prospects

So far Africa has encountered more than its providential portion of governance issues as explained in the preceding sections. But there are good reasons to be cautiously optimistic about the future. Diamond concur with this by sharing that despite major challenges facing African governance and leadership democratically, governance have made some of improvement in several African countries as elections have been regularized as there are legitimate tenures and balance of power between executive are becoming normal. Moreover, the (world Bank) in their study would have us believe that there seems to be some economic development in the offing as Technological advances, discovery of natural resources and expansion in the volume of trade has removed millions from poverty and opened new opportunities for growth (65). Another one is through regional integration in bodies like the African Union (AU) and the Economic Community of West Africa (ECOWAS). And those Unions may well advance economic cooperation and political stability throughout the continent. Further still, there is an increasing public awareness among Africans of their rights and

the role played by good governance. In fact, the youths as active populations of Africa have also become increasingly involved and are asking more accountability from their leaders. This suggests a rise in civic awareness that can be channeled into positive action.

There's a thin ray of hope for the continent, though – thanks to technological developments and improved connectivity, there is quite a bit more information available now; and that has spurred on citizenship engagement. Without a doubt, the advent of social media platforms and other digital tools have provided a platform for African population to voice out their opinions, demand for accountability from leaders and contribute to framing public discussions. In this essay, I will endeavor to pitch some philosophical tents from the intellectual archive that may show us the road towards governance and leadership (and development as well) in Africa. But in considering these remedies one has to take account of the complexity and variety of Africa's cultural as well as political. Each country in the continent has its own challenges, history and context that make it impossible to roll out a generic model.

Afrocentrism: This is African concept/philosophy established by some African scholars. It re-disciplines/ re-centers the African gaze, history and culture. Leaders can give Africans a sense of pride and identity by taking the Afrocentric route. This goodwill can, in the long term, lead to a deeper respect for their African heritage and consequently foster a sense of self-reliance. Adopting Afrocentric values in leadership would in no small measure help to foster cultural preservation, inclusiveness and celebration of diversity among the continents.

Humanism: Humanism highly values and gives a strong emphasis to every person's intrinsic value. By taking humanistic approach, African leaders can put a value on people's lives and their rights. This includes strong investments in education, health and social services, as well as being committed to equality, justice and human rights. There is no question that a humanistic leadership can unleash the potential of people for greater development and prosperity on the continent.

Communitarianism: A leading theorist of this approach is Amitai Etzioni and Alasdair MacIntyre. In general, you value community and what's best for everyone. In Africa where individuals have strong attachments to community and communal life is considered a way of living, there are lessons that communitarianism has for governance and leadership (87; 75). Leaders can encourage citizens to engage in dialogue, make informed decisions, take responsibility for the well-being of their communities and work together for a better society. This in turn, may result in more social cohesion and a more open and participatory governance.

Ubuntu: Ubuntu is an ancient African worldview that highlights the connection and interdependence of all people. It fosters a sense of social cohesion, compassion and shared responsibility. Following the principles of Ubuntu philosophy could help African leaders make good decisions for the collective, rather than prioritizing themselves at the expense of everyone else.

Pan-Africanism: The philosophy of Pan-Africanism is an approach that can positively influence the dynamics of governance and leadership in Africa. In order to work together in addressing current challenges, like violence, poverty and backwardness,

African leaders can bring unity solidarity and cooperation among themselves. Adopting the Pan-African way of thinking will stimulate a sense of common destiny and sustainable developments.

Ethical Leadership: In a continent ravaged by corruption and nepotism, we need ethical leadership more than ever. What should leaders in Africa do for doing so. African leaders should demonstrate integrity, transparency and accountability. Lead by moral example they can build trust and encourage more citizens to participate in democracy.

Inclusive decision-making: Africa is a continent of multiple ethnic, linguistic and religious communities. Good governance calls for all-inclusive decision-making that takes into account the views of every interest group. It will be conducive towards breaking down the hegemonic wall, by taking initiative for having dialogue, facilitating variety and allaying the rights of minor groups where by leaders can create social harmony and stability.

Economic Development: Most importantly, addressing the human economic challenges in African is crucial for sustainable governance and leadership must be about prioritizing economic development, jobs, education and health. Through long term development strategies, African countries could minimize poverty, inequality and reliance on foreign aid.

Conclusion

This paper established that governance and leadership in Africa face turbulent challenges rooted in history, ethnicity, and institutional weakness. Yet with proactive reforms, inclusive policies, and visionary leadership, African turns her complex challenges into opportunities by embracing Afrocentric values, promoting ethical governance, and placing at the front burner economic development, African nations can push forward for prosperous and sustainable future. Moreover, the continent's youthful and vibrant population, rich natural resources, and growing technological adoption present significant potential for growth. To actualize this, African leaders must as a matter of necessity focus on building accountable institutions, fostering national unity, and driving innovation. The paper submits that, Africa's path requires a blend of traditional values and modern solutions that are peoplecentric, Africa can overcome its challenges and become a beacon of progress and stability.

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