Modern Africa in Global Context: Cold War, Development, and Contemporary Geopolitics

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Introduction

This book advances a simple proposition: to understand the political economies of African states today, we must situate them within a long arc that links late colonial rule, Cold War interventions, postcolonial development strategies, and the contemporary return of great-power and middle-power competition. Rather than treating these eras as discrete, we trace the continuities and ruptures that connect them—how decisions about sovereignty, security, and accumulation made in one period recalibrated the options available in the next. The objective is synthetic and pragmatic. Policymakers require a coherent map of structural forces; students need a narrative that places individual country cases in a wider frame; and general readers deserve an account that neither romanticizes nor pathologizes the continent, but recognizes African agency within a global system shaped by power and markets.

We begin by revisiting the end of empire and the formative choices of state-building. Decolonization unfolded amid uneven economic geographies and the surge of Pan-African aspirations, producing governments that balanced nation-building with external alignments. The Cold War soon transformed these new sovereignties into sites of intense competition, making Africa a theater for proxy conflicts, covert operations, and ideational experiments. Yet the era was more than geopolitics: it was a time of ambition, from socialist villagization to state-led industrialization and import substitution. These choices embedded enduring institutions—from party systems and militaries to parastatals—that continue to shape political economies.

Development paradigms shifted dramatically with the debt crises of the 1980s and the rise of structural adjustment. Conditional lending reoriented fiscal priorities, liberalized trade and finance, and redefined the very language of governance. Aid proliferated, as did the roles of international financial institutions, bilateral donors, and an expanding NGO sector. While these reforms generated efficiencies in some places, they also constrained policy space, weakened social contracts, and reconfigured the relationships among state, market, and citizen. The legacies of this period are visible today in budget structures, regulatory regimes, and the politics of austerity and reform.

The twenty-first century ushered in a multipolar landscape. China's infrastructure finance, Europe's trade and regulatory standards, America's security partnerships, and the growing footprints of India, Turkey, Gulf states, and Russia together compose a crowded field of suitors and stakeholders. African governments have leveraged this competition to diversify finance and technology, yet have also navigated new dependencies and risks—especially in debt sustainability, commodity exposure, and digital infrastructures. Simultaneously, continental initiatives such as the African

Continental Free Trade Area signal an endogenous push for scale, industrialization, and rule-making from within Africa itself.

Sectorally, the continent sits at the intersection of global transformations. Rapid urbanization is recasting labor markets and political mobilization; mobile money and platform economies are rewriting inclusion and surveillance; health shocks from HIV/AIDS to Ebola and COVID-19 have tested public authority and international cooperation. Climate change intensifies vulnerability but also positions Africa at the center of the global energy transition—through critical minerals, renewable potential, and debates over just financing. Maritime chokepoints and overland corridors—from the Red Sea to the Sahel and the Gulf of Guinea—have become strategic spaces where security, trade, and diplomacy converge.

Throughout, a core theme is agency: African actors are not merely responding to global forces; they are co-authoring them. From central bankers defending currency regimes to port authorities negotiating concessions, from regional organizations deploying peace operations to city governments regulating platforms, choices made on the continent reverberate outward. To capture this interplay, the book integrates political economy, international relations, and economic history, combining archival insights with contemporary policy analysis and comparative case studies across regions and resource endowments.

The chapters that follow proceed in three movements. The early chapters establish the historical scaffolding from late colonial economies through the Cold War, emphasizing how sovereignty and security were constructed. The middle chapters examine development strategies, aid architectures, and institutional transformations, including regionalism and civil society. The final chapters analyze contemporary geopolitics—major and emerging external partners, trade and industrial policy, finance and debt, currency politics, strategic corridors, environment and energy transition, migration and diasporas—and conclude by outlining plausible futures and policy options. The aim is not to prescribe a single model, but to clarify trade-offs and identify pathways that expand policy space and public welfare.

By offering a synthesis across the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, this book invites readers to rethink familiar binaries—state versus market, dependency versus autonomy, external imposition versus local initiative. The picture that emerges is more contingent and more hopeful: a set of evolving political economies in which constraints are real but strategies matter, and in which Africa’s role in the global system is neither predetermined nor marginal. It is, instead, central to how the next decades of world order, development, and geopolitics will unfold.

CHAPTER ONE: Empire’s End: Late Colonial Economies and the Road to Independence

The map of Africa in the mid-twentieth century was a patchwork of imperial claims, drawn with little regard for ecology, language, or history. What appeared as neat colonial territories on paper were, in practice, administrative experiments in extraction and control. The British, French, Belgian, Portuguese, Spanish, Italian, and German legacies—some inherited, some contested—shaped distinct patterns of governance and economic organization. These patterns did not vanish at independence; they were repurposed. To grasp the continent’s political economies today, it is essential to understand how colonial structures reoriented African production, labor, and sovereignty toward distant metropoles, and how the erosion of those structures generated new possibilities and constraints.

Economic geographies were carved around single commodities and narrow transport corridors. In West Africa, cocoa, groundnuts, and palm oil tied coastal enclaves to European markets. In Central Africa, copper and cotton dominated. In East and Southern Africa, gold, diamonds, and later oil threaded through port cities and rail lines. Colonial authorities subsidized infrastructure that served export zones—ports, railways, and administrative towns—while neglecting internal connectivity and diversification. The result was spatially uneven development: pockets of modernity in mining towns and port cities, surrounded by rural peripheries integrated into global commodity chains on terms set elsewhere.

Labor systems varied, but their logic was often coercive. In settler colonies like Kenya, Southern Rhodesia, and South Africa, land alienation created reserves and forced Africans into wage labor on European farms and mines. In non-settler colonies, colonial authorities imposed hut and poll taxes payable in cash, obliging men to seek wage work on plantations, in mines, or on public works. Indirect rule relied on chiefs and “warrant” officials to collect taxes and supply labor, embedding colonial power in local hierarchies. These systems extracted value efficiently but frayed social fabrics, as the demand for labor disrupted kinship networks, agricultural cycles, and local authority.

Fiscal regimes were shaped by metropolitan priorities. Colonial budgets were often balanced through taxes on African producers and consumption duties on imports, with little concession to local needs. Monetary systems were tied to metropolitan currencies or specific commodity boards that stabilized prices for European buyers at the cost of volatility for African sellers. In British colonies, colonial sterling balances accumulated in London; in French territories, the CFA franc circulated within the French zone, with reserves held in Paris. These arrangements ensured convertibility and exchange-rate stability, but limited African control over monetary policy and foreign reserves.

Transport infrastructure reflected these priorities. Railways from ports to mines and plantations were built with export flows in mind. The Uganda Railway linked the Kenyan coast to Lake Victoria and Uganda’s cotton areas; the Benguela Railway ran from the Angolan coast to the Congo’s copper belt; the railway from Dakar to Bamako facilitated groundnut exports from Mali; the Tazara railway connected Zambia’s Copperbelt to Dar es Salaam after independence. These arteries enabled colonial fiscal extraction and military mobility. After independence, they became national backbones—yet they left many regions isolated, and their orientation toward ports shaped later patterns of trade dependency.

Commodity boards and marketing monopolies were a hallmark of late colonial economics. Established to stabilize prices and coordinate exports, they operated as state-backed cartels. Cocoa and groundnut boards in West Africa, cotton boards in Sudan and Mali, and coffee boards in East Africa set producer prices and sold produce abroad, capturing the difference between local and world prices. While these boards insulated producers from immediate market swings, they also transferred surplus away from farmers, distorting incentives and creating political constituencies around price controls. Their legacy would be contested fiercely at independence, as new governments weighed their utility for revenue against their suppression of producer incomes.

Urbanization accelerated under colonialism, but in uneven waves. Mining towns like Kitwe, Elizabethville, and Johannesburg attracted labor from across regions. Port cities—Lagos, Dakar, Abidjan, Mombasa, Dar es Salaam, Luanda—grew as nodes of administration and trade. In some colonies, urban African populations were governed through “native” housing schemes and segregated zones; in others, informal settlements emerged as labor inflows outpaced state capacity. The colonial city was a crucible of new social classes—clerks, artisans, dockworkers, and traders—whose expectations of modernity and citizenship would shape the politics of decolonization.

The Second World War transformed colonial Africa’s role. Allied campaigns in North and East Africa drew in African troops and labor, and wartime demand for minerals and agricultural products intensified production. The war also exposed the fragility of imperial prestige. Soldiers returning from Burma, Ethiopia, and North Africa carried new political horizons, while colonial administrators confronted labor unrest and rising African expectations. The Atlantic Charter’s language of self-determination resonated, even as colonial powers sought to postpone its application. Wartime fiscal strains and postwar reconstruction needs made metropolitan treasuries more dependent on colonial revenues, even as the legitimacy of empire frayed.

Postwar economic planning introduced a new vocabulary of “development.” British and French authorities produced reports—like the 1945 British Labour government's Colonial Development and Welfare Act and French postwar investment plans—that promised investment in health, education, and infrastructure. Yet development was tethered to export growth. The 1947 French Zone's investment program, the FIDES (Fonds d'Investissement pour le Développement Economique et Social), funneled resources into roads, ports, and plantations, with modest allocations for social services. Belgian investments in Congo focused heavily on mining and transport. The promise of development was real, but its spatial and sectoral priorities reinforced existing dependencies.

Labor militancy rose in the war's wake. Dockworkers, miners, and railway workers organized strikes from Lagos to Brazzaville, from the Copperbelt to Dakar. The 1947 railway strike in French West Africa, the 1945 Dakar strike, the 1940s Copperbelt strikes, and the 1947 Mombasa dock strike were emblematic: they fused economic demands with nascent political aspirations. Colonial authorities responded with a mix of repression and concession, offering wage increases and better working conditions while resisting broader political reforms. The new trade unions became nurseries for nationalist leaders, forging links between urban workers and emerging political associations.

African political associations proliferated. In the Gold Coast, the United Gold Coast Convention, formed in 1947, quickly gave way to Kwame Nkrumah's Convention People's Party (CPP) in 1949, which mobilized "Positive Action" through strikes and nonviolent protest. In Nigeria, the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons, later the Action Group and the Northern People's Congress, articulated regional interests within a federal framework. In French West Africa, the Rassemblement Démocratique Africain (RDA) coordinated parties across colonies, while in Madagascar, the Marxist-inspired MDG became a vehicle for anti-colonial mobilization. These groups bridged elite petitions with mass organizing, drawing legitimacy from urban labor and rural grievances.

The Belgian Congo presented a distinctive trajectory. Under a paternalistic system that offered limited political education, the Congo remained tightly controlled by mining interests and an administrative technocracy. The rise of the Association des Étudiants Congolais and the Confédération des Syndicats Chrétiens created nuclei of political consciousness, particularly in Léopoldville and Elisabethville. Belgian reluctance to prepare for independence meant that political organizations formed rapidly and explosively. The 1959 Leopoldville riots and subsequent arrests of Patrice Lumumba and others accelerated the timetable, as Brussels pivoted from denial to hurried withdrawal.

Portuguese territories—Angola, Mozambique, Guinea-Bissau—remained under the Estado Novo's rigid rule. The colonial economy was structured around plantations (cotton, sugar, sisal), mining (oil in Cabinda, diamonds in Angola), and settler agriculture. Political expression was suppressed; nationalist movements like the MPLA, FNLA, and UNITA in Angola and FRELIMO in Mozambique operated underground and in exile. Armed struggle began in the early 1960s, turning these colonies into protracted battlefields. The Portuguese strategy of “self-sufficient” colonial economies tied local producers to metropolitan monopolies, leaving few fiscal resources for social services and setting the stage for deeply disrupted post-independence recovery.

In British East Africa, the Mau Mau uprising in Kenya (1952–1960) reshaped colonial policy. Land alienation in the “White Highlands,” forced labor, and racial hierarchies fueled an insurgency that was met with brutal counterinsurgency, detention camps, and emergency regulations. The British response combined repression with political reforms, culminating in the Lancaster House conferences and the path to independence under Jomo Kenyatta. The economic legacy included a dualism: a modern commercial farming sector tied to European settlers and a smallholder sector that had survived displacement and was, after independence, targeted for resettlement and credit programs.

Southern Africa diverged sharply. South Africa’s 1948 National Party victory institutionalized apartheid, reshaping labor markets, land tenure, and urban governance. The mines required vast labor reserves, while the 1913 Land Act and subsequent Group Areas Act enforced segregation. Neighboring territories—Namibia (South West Africa) under South African administration, Southern Rhodesia (later Zimbabwe), and the High Commission territories—were drawn into this orbit. By the late 1950s, the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland attempted to integrate economies under a white-dominated structure, provoking African resistance that would eventually lead to its dissolution and later armed struggles in Zimbabwe and Mozambique.

Economic debates at independence revolved around three axes: state capacity, external dependence, and social equity. New leaders confronted fiscal systems reliant on narrow export bases and volatile world prices. They inherited infrastructures built for extraction, not integration. Monetary systems tied to metropolitan currencies offered stability but limited autonomy. Commodity boards generated revenue but distorted markets. Urban labor movements demanded wages and rights; rural producers sought better prices and services; emerging bureaucracies aspired to plan development. The choices made in the first independence decade—nationalizations, currency reforms, industrial policies—would set trajectories for decades.

The structure of colonial trade left a deep imprint. Export commodities—cocoa, coffee, cotton, copper, oil—dominated foreign exchange earnings. Imports were largely manufactured goods and machinery from Europe. Terms of trade swings could therefore make or break budgets. When global prices rose, governments expanded services and investments; when they fell, austerity and austerity-induced protests followed. These cycles conditioned postcolonial politics, creating incentives to diversify exports and build domestic industries, but also revealing the difficulty of escaping the "primary commodity trap."

Legal and institutional legacies mattered as well. Colonial property regimes often privileged settler or foreign-owned enterprises, complicating post-independence land reforms. Court systems and administrative procedures were inherited, then adapted to new national contexts. In Francophone Africa, the post-colonial currency union preserved many fiscal links, while Anglophone countries experimented with more direct control over monetary policy. In all cases, the bureaucracy inherited from empire was the machinery through which new national ambitions had to be realized, and its strengths and weaknesses would shape the pace and character of reform.

Infrastructure, designed for export, shaped the map of opportunity. Ports like Lagos, Dakar, Abidjan, Mombasa, Dar es Salaam, and Dar es Salaam became gateways for national trade and development strategies, but also chokepoints vulnerable to global shipping disruptions. Railways from the interior to the coast oriented regional trade outward, while internal routes remained sparse. Road networks often followed colonial paths, leaving some regions marginalized. Post-independence governments grappled with the costs of maintaining and expanding these assets, often borrowing heavily from external partners to do so, thereby linking infrastructure to future debt dynamics.

The late colonial period also saw the rise of development planning as an administrative craft. French and British authorities produced "development plans" that prioritized export-led growth and modest social investments. These plans often assumed a benign role for the colonial state and downplayed structural inequalities. Independent governments adopted planning frameworks with greater ambition, combining socialist rhetoric with pragmatic engagement with foreign capital. Planning thus became a site of contestation, where technical targets met political realities, and where external advisors and domestic constituencies negotiated the pace of change.

International markets were never neutral. The Bretton Woods system, established in 1944, created the IMF and World Bank to stabilize currencies and finance reconstruction, but initially had little direct involvement with African colonies. For many territories, the real monetary anchors were the metropolitan currencies and commodity boards. The postwar rise of the dollar and the structure of global trade placed constraints on newly independent states. Their ability to import technology, finance infrastructure, and manage balance-of-payers deficits would hinge on commodity prices and access to external credit—factors largely outside their control, but within the sphere of global politics.

Regional dynamics also mattered. In French West and Equatorial Africa, shared currency and administrative traditions fostered early attempts at cooperation, even before independence. In British East Africa, conversations about a customs union and shared services preceded independence, laying groundwork for the East African

Community. In Southern Africa, the shadow of South Africa’s economic dominance and apartheid shaped the options for neighbors. These regional frameworks were both opportunities and constraints: they offered scale and shared infrastructure, but also limited sovereignty and exposed economies to one another’s shocks.

The transition to independence was not uniform. Some colonies negotiated a gradual transfer of power, others experienced sudden collapses. Ghana’s 1957 independence was a careful, negotiated process. Nigeria’s 1960 independence followed a federal compromise. Congo’s 1960 independence was chaotic, preceded by unrest and followed by crisis. In Lusophone territories, independence came only after long wars, leaving devastated economies and fractured institutions. In Southern Africa, majority rule would take decades longer. These different paths mattered for state capacity, legitimacy, and the political coalitions that governed postcolonial societies.

African producers and workers were not passive in this transformation. Farmers adapted crops to global demand and local conditions. Traders built networks across colonial boundaries, sometimes defying colonial regulations. Urban associations organized mutual aid, cultural clubs, and political forums. These networks constituted an everyday political economy that existed alongside formal colonial structures. At independence, these social forces pressed their claims on the new states: for land, jobs, prices, and voice. Their influence would help determine whether national projects were inclusive or exclusive, participatory or coercive.

The late colonial economy thus left a triple inheritance: infrastructure and institutions oriented toward extraction and external markets; fiscal and monetary regimes that privileged stability over autonomy; and social hierarchies that shaped access to opportunity. Independence promised a reorientation—toward national development, African identity, and sovereignty. The tools available for that reorientation were shaped by the past, but the choices were open. How leaders balanced immediate needs with long-term transformation, and how citizens negotiated those choices, set the stage for the next chapters of African history.

It is tempting to view decolonization as a clean break, but the continuity of structures and interests ensured that empire’s end was also empire’s afterlife. Colonial revenue systems became national tax regimes; colonial boards became state marketing agencies; colonial railways became national transport backbones. Where reforms were attempted—through currency changes, nationalizations, or land redistribution—they encountered institutional inertia and external pressures. The political contest was therefore over how far and how fast to depart from inherited models, and what to put in their place.

External actors maintained a keen interest. Metropolitan powers offered technical advisors, defense agreements, and trade preferences. The Cold War, still in its early postwar phase, was beginning to cast shadows, with ideological blocs attentive to new states' alignments. Private capital, especially in mining and plantations, negotiated concessions and contracts with new governments. International organizations, still nascent, watched from the sidelines. The stage was set for a complex interplay between African agency and global forces, each shaping the other in the years to come.

One final feature of late colonial economies deserves attention: their demographic structure. Populations were young, with high dependency ratios and limited education. Health systems were rudimentary outside urban centers and mining towns. Life expectancy was low, and mortality rates were high. Independence governments inherited vast social needs with limited fiscal capacity. The mismatch between ambitions and resources would be a constant theme. It forced innovation, but also invited external aid—a dependency that would become central to the continent's political economy in the decades that followed.

In surveying the landscape at the moment of independence, we see not a blank slate but a dense web of material constraints and social energies. The routes to independence were as varied as the colonies themselves, yet they shared common features: the weight of colonial infrastructures, the volatility of commodity dependence, and the imperative of building a nation from disparate parts. The next chapter turns to how these new states attempted to coalesce—through Pan-Africanism, the Organization of African Unity, and nonalignment—while managing the demands of sovereignty in a world still dominated by empire.