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Africa is not the exception

— our theories are

International politics has long treated Africa as the exception. It is the continent where the state appears more fragile, sovereignty more contested, and governance more disorderly than the political theories inherited from the 20th century can explain. The same question, therefore, keeps returning: why does Africa refuse to fit our political models?

But what if we have been asking the wrong question all along? What if Africa is not defying political theory, but rather theory is failing to keep pace with Africa? And what if the 'African exception' is simply evidence that the analytical tools we use to understand political order are becoming less capable of explaining the world as it is?

This is not solely an academic debate. As Europe deepens its engagement with Africa on security, migration, critical minerals, supply chains and long-term economic partnerships, much of its policy still rests on an assumption that appears almost self-evident: political authority looks broadly the same everywhere, and the state remains the natural centre through which political reality should be understood — and governed.

But Africa suggests otherwise.

A case in point

Across large parts of the African continent, political authority cannot be reduced to formal state institutions. Nor does it operate within the conceptual boundaries that conventional thinking about sovereignty, governance and conflict assumes. It is constantly negotiated among governments, armed movements, local authorities, commercial networks, humanitarian organisations, regional powers, digital infrastructures and community-based institutions that organise everyday life.

Sudan offers one of the clearest illustrations of this. More than 30 million people currently require humanitarian assistance and protection, making Sudan one of the world's largest humanitarian crises. During the war,

digital financial platforms became an essential economic lifeline for millions of Sudanese inside and outside the country. Emergency Response Rooms organised food distribution, health services and local relief efforts across many communities, a role repeatedly documented by United Nations agencies and ReliefWeb. At the same time, commercial networks and community initiatives continued to sustain economic and social life under conditions of state collapse.

Sudan is not unique in this. In eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo, humanitarian access has long depended on negotiating with multiple centres of authority rather than a single state actor. Across the Sahel, armed groups and local authorities have reshaped patterns of governance and territorial control in ways that conventional state-centred frameworks struggle to explain. Libya offers another example, where political authority has emerged through overlapping formal institutions, local power brokers and regional networks rather than a single sovereign centre.

These examples do not suggest that African states are all alike. Rather, very different contexts repeatedly expose the limits of our inherited assumptions about political order. Describing these arrangements simply as evidence of state failure misses what they reveal: political authority is being exercised through networks that conventional state-centred frameworks struggle to see.

Reconsidering our frameworks

Nevertheless, many policy debates still begin with the question of how the state can be strengthened, rather than where political authority is actually being exercised. This is a real problem. It suggests that Europe doesn't simply misunderstand dispersed political authority. But by insisting on formal state institutions as the primary interlocutors, it can actually reinforce the gap between formal authority and effective political capacity.

When European policymakers equate strengthening the state with strengthening governance, they risk empowering governments whose reach barely extends beyond national capitals — or overlooking actors who actually mediate access to communities, deliver services or negotiate local order. The same assumption distorts European approaches to security, development and economic partnerships, producing agreements that look coherent on paper but fail to deliver the outcomes policymakers expect.

A more useful policy approach would begin by mapping where authority

is actually exercised, rather than assuming where it should reside. It would identify the actors who control access, deliver services, enforce rules and connect communities to wider markets and institutions — whether or not they carry formal state titles. This also means treating these actors not simply as temporary substitutes for the state, but as part of the political landscape through which policy actually operates. This matters because European policy also decides which forms of authority are visible to policymakers.

What appears today as an African exception may in fact be an early glimpse of where political authority is heading everywhere.

The consequences extend beyond governance. In security policy, Europe may negotiate with actors who possess formal authority but lack the local reach to implement agreements. In development, it may build programmes around institutions that cannot deliver without informal networks around them. In economic partnerships, it may assume that investment follows formal jurisdictions when access to markets and communities depends on actors operating across them.

A different approach would not mean bypassing states or replacing them with informal actors. The point is not to replace one centre of authority with another, but to recognise that authority may be produced through the relationships between them. European policymakers should approach these networks without romanticising them or reducing them to evidence of state failure, and instead ask what political functions they perform and what happens when policy ignores them.

That shift matters beyond Africa. Once political authority is understood as something that can be distributed across states, networks, institutions and infrastructures, Africa stops looking like a deviation from the model. It becomes a place where changes in political authority are unusually visible.

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