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Review

AFRICA IN WORLD POLITICS: ENGAGING A CHANGING GLOBAL ORDER

John W. Harbeson and Donald Rothchild (eds). (5th ed). Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2013. 392pp.

Manfred Wogugu^{*}

The issue of central concern for the editors and contributing authors of this book is whether Africa's emergence on the world political scene will usher in the enabling environment for sustainable broad-spectrum development in the political, socio-economic, cultural and environmental spheres. The authors also make an attempt to address the issue of economic growth for the region. The underlying assumption is that the spread of economic growth to all countries in the continent, if it prevails, will reduce poverty and inequality and ultimately improve the quality of life for Africans. Against the backdrop of the global economic and political order ushered in by the emerging power of the G-20 countries, including those in the Global South, Africa's engagement in a changing world order, is therefore contingent on the continent's ability to emerge from "marginalization to greater economic prominence in the world stage." As scholars of African and international politics, the editors sound an optimistic note highlighting their attempt to "broaden and deepen understanding of the human condition in Africa" and indeed, to a brighter future for its people and their countries." Contextually, the human condition in Africa and prospects for a brighter future for African peoples and their countries is the central organizing theme for the book. To accomplish this objective, the book assembles and addresses a kaleidoscopic array of issues which are organized in four main themes, ranging chronologically from (1) Engaging a Changing Global Order, (2) Historical Parameters, (3) African States and the State System, to (4) Global

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Engagement. Fourteen essays reflecting the complex, multidimensional, and intellectually challenging issues of Africa's global engagement post-Cold War withdrawal of the major powers, were selected

The trajectory of Africa's global engagement is notably characterized by colonialism, political independence in the 1960s, the Cold War and the war on terror. In the early phase of the twentieth century Africa is confronted with issues of democratization, weak state structures, corruption and weakly developed economies. Despite the neo-liberal economic policies that markedly reduced state-led promotion of development in the 1980s, and a three-decade long pressure for African countries to liberalize their economies, there seems to show an indication that some African economies are growing, although unequally, despite persistent high rates of poverty and inequality. This appears to be the optimistic conclusion of the editors as evident in the meticulous attempt made in the book's thematic segments to address the identified issues of interest to scholars of African politics and development.

Understandably, as a political science-oriented discourse, there was heavy emphasis on the role of state actors in the political system vis-à-vis civil society activism in the face of rights-based discourses in the continent. Cognizant of the centrality of the issues addressed in the lives of Africans, it is however, lamentable to observe the unquestionable assumption by the editors of the book, of a geopolitical order that does not give Africans enough scope to influence and become equal partners in the changing global order in which they are nothing but appendages and peripheral actors. Given the growing gap in wealth between the rich industrialized countries and Africa in the global economy, Africa's role is increasingly becoming very ineffectual because of the fundamental and structural cleavages engendered by both external and internal forces on the African development landscape. Despite all the rhetoric of integrating African economies into the global system, the emerging evidence shows a continent in the process of de-coupling itself from the rest of the world because of poverty, and ravages of pandemics like HIV/AIDS, Ebola and malaria. In addition, the continent is currently under siege by the terrorist activities of Islamic fundamentalists.

Evidently, the health status of Africans in general has worsened because of the deteriorating economy and the neo-liberal economic prescriptions of globalization. Health, which used to be in the hands of governments during the early stages of independence, has now been privatized and the responsibility given to NGOs, private

corporations and international foundations to provide health care. This externalization of responsibility of health provision has been detrimental to large segments of the rural poor and the marginalized in the urban setting. Moreover, it implies the abrogation of local political “contracts” to provide health in the early days of Independence to “good will” when private organizations took over and individuals were made “passive recipients” of charity; thus compromising their wellbeing as it increases their vulnerability and insecurity. As a result of these externally imposed policies of structural adjustment, African countries were forced to cut back on state expenditures on social services, especially education and health. The collapse of the health infrastructure was a direct consequence of this misguided policy prescription.

Apart from health, the other issue that impinges on the ability of Africans to engage as equal partners in the global order is the role of corruption and weak governance systems. Not only is there a growing gap between the rich countries of the global north and Africa, there is also a very deep divide between the few corrupt political and business leaders in Africa and the rest of the population. The root cause of this phenomenon is weak governance that enthrones corruption and clientelist political networks that reward allies while excluding others, which chapter 2 of the book alludes to.

Recently, there appears to be an emerging glimmer of hope from observers of global development with respect to the economic performance of the South-South region of the world. Again, Africa’s performance within this zone has been completely eclipsed by the trends in economic growth of China, India and Brazil. No single African country comes very close to either the individual or combined growth of these aforementioned South-South group of countries. Cognizant of the fact that economic power and military power are intricately intertwined in society’s ability to engage effectively in the global order, Africa’s poor economic performance constitutes a serious deterrent to its ability to engage creditably in the changing global order as it is presently constituted.

This issue raises a fundamental question. What is Africa’s role in a world order created after the collapse of the League of Nations and the subsequent emergence of a post-World War II construction of a global decision-making organ such as the United Nations system and its affiliates? With the exception of China as the only non-white permanent member, the current structure of the United Nations guarantees veto powers to its dominant European/American members of the Security Council, to the exclusion of

the African continent. It is ironic that scholars of politics and international development who crafted these organizations never reflected on the implications of this structural imbalance in the post-1945 global order, on the ability of Africans to take full control of their destiny. Evidently, there appears to be a 70-year long international conspiracy to keep Africa on the sidelines in global engagement. It is a farce to expect that Africa can control and address its socio-economic, cultural, political and environmental challenges in the current global order without a structural overhaul of the system. Given Africa's past colonial experience, there is a perception in the continent that the post-1945 global order is nothing more than a neo-colonial arrangement and mechanism that sustains continued western hegemony on Africa. Hence, Africa's acceptance of the framework for the prevailing global order imposes ideological and political constraints, as the yardstick against which African achievements are measured, derive in large part, from externally imposed paradigms of development outside the control of African countries. Consequently, the emerging global yardstick serves to over-celebrate the dominant economic, political, military and cultural values and interests of neo-colonialist operatives, devalue African ideas, knowledge and governing systems and consequently reinforce oppressive conditions in the continent.

Presently, America's rekindled interest in Africa, after its knee-jack withdrawal at the end of the Cold War, is seen as an orchestrated attempt to co-opt African countries into the so-called War on Terror. In reality this slogan has been problematic to some segments of the African population. One school of thought in the region sees this as a veiled but unfortunate military and political posturing to wage war against Islam by the West. Reminiscent of Africa's role during the Cold War, there is a pushback that Africa should no longer be drawn into a proxy war involving radical Islam and the West, its culture and way of life. The implications of this association of Africa with Muslim fundamentalism have been far-reaching and catastrophic. Radical fundamentalist Muslim terrorists like Boko Haram, AQIM and Al-Shabab have pillaged, bombed and destroyed lives and property in the guise of their hatred for Western education and values in some African countries with sizeable Muslim populations. Moreover, unable to penetrate the defenses of Western countries, these ISIS and Al-Qaeda affiliates or sympathizers have resorted to bombing and destroying what appear to be soft targets like international hotels, malls, public buildings and bus stations in Tanzania, Kenya, Mali and Nigeria, respectively.

Admittedly, issues of Africa's engagement in a changing global order deserve serious consideration in the context of globalization which is transforming the socio-economic, political, cultural and environmental landscape of the African continent. However, the identification and heavy focus on economic growth as the key to unleashing the continent's potential to reduce poverty and inequality, and ultimately improve the quality of life for Africans, inadvertently marginalizes the role and the deleterious impact of the current architecture of global engagement which dates back to 1945. The uncritical acceptance of this framework as the norm to assess African capacity to effectively engage globally is flawed because the yardstick for success is a product developed and maintained by largely European and American veto power at the expense of politically powerless Africans and other groups. Apart from the limitations of the post-World War II architecture of global order, recent African engagement is generating some backlash. There is a growing perception that Africa is culturally very vulnerable. According to Ali A. Mazrui, a contributing author to this book, Africa is the only continent that accepted externally imposed religions such as Christianity and Islam without resistance. Based on this premise, the role of radical Islamization of parts of the continent as well as the recent attempt to pressure Africans to accept and respect gay and lesbian rights are a cause for concern in a number of African societies. Admittedly, these externally generated pressures are potentially undermining African societies and seem at odds with African traditional values and practices. In conclusion, this review attempts to challenge the existing paradigm of global order in which Africans are consigned to be peripheral actors in the changing global engagement. The next edition of the book, it is hoped, will take these observations into account when examining both the internal and external cleavages as well as the structural bottlenecks that are constraints to eradicating poverty and inequality in Africa.