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To understand African politics we need to understand regional inequalities

How do regional inequalities shape “politics as usual” in African countries? The coinciding of economic and political geography today, Catherine Boone argues, reflects divides that were erected during the colonial era. What are the political cleavages that stem from this “regionalism by design”? And what does it mean for anyone looking to understand African politics today?

Levels of regional economic inequality – that is, inequalities across provinces within countries – are extraordinarily high across the African continent. The key finding of a [2022 IMF report looking at a sample of eight African states](#) is that the average gap in level of basic infrastructure provision – water, electricity and schools – between a country’s most prosperous and its poorest regions is in the order of 3:1, making these disparities some of the most extreme in the world. Disparities in educational attainment in Nigeria illustrate the gap between that country’s “leading” and “lagging” regions: in the southwestern region in 2010, 54% of the population had completed secondary school, while the comparable figure for the most populous parts of the North was only 18%.

Many scholars have noted that beyond the obvious economic implications, such inequalities have serious *political* effects. Since 2020, for example, devastating civil wars in [Sudan](#) and [Ethiopia](#) have torn countries apart along the lines of regional inequalities – lines that appear to have deepened even as these economies have grown in aggregate.

In a new book, [Inequality and Political Cleavage in Africa: Regionalism by Design](#), I draw widely on contributions from history, geography and political science to develop a broader theory of the systemic political effects of extreme socio-economic disparities across subnational regions. Whereas the literature on the politics of Africa’s regional inequalities usually focuses on civil wars such as Sudan’s, my goal is to focus on how regional economic inequalities shape “politics as usual” in countries where party politics and elections are an important part of national political life.

Separate and Unequal: Economic and institutional divides erected during the colonial era

I argue that a combination of historical-structural features have worked to bring the politics of regional inequality to the fore in national politics in many – perhaps most – countries across the continent. The first of these is uneven economic development. Colonial rulers promoted highly spatially-concentrated patterns of economic development of key, export-producing sectors. Provinces that produced cocoa, coffee, tea, cotton, copper and other export commodities were usually favoured, through colonial investments in infrastructure, higher incomes, and the availability of better educational opportunities. Other regions of each colony were less favoured along these dimensions.



Colonial rulers favoured the economic development of provinces that produced key commodities for export, such as cocoa, coffee, tea, cotton and copper



The second historical-structural feature is institutional. The territorial grids of colonial states divided each colony into nested administrative units – provinces, districts and “Native Authorities.” Provincial boundaries tended to delineate export-producing regions as distinct units, while using internal boundaries to define other regions that were targeted to play less productive economic roles in the colonial economy: labour-exporting regions, food staple producing regions, pastoral zones, and so on. Land tenure regimes and other institutional constraints often worked to impede the permanent migration of people across many of the colonies’ internal administrative borders, such that regional identities and regional inequalities overlapped. Development of the export-led colonial economy and the colonial state institutional grid thus developed in tandem – with significant political repercussions.



In Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, the neighbourhoods of Msasani and Masaki exist side by side along old colonial boundaries from European settlement. Source: © Johnny Miller photography – see [here](#).

When competitive party politics came into play in many African countries in the 1950s – as most colonies moved toward political Independence in the 1960s – many of the strongest political parties developed in the export-producing provinces. In many countries, these went on to consolidate national power in the 1960s and 1970s. Economic growth strategies in the 1960s-1980s often then built upon the inherited economic strengths of the leading, export-producing regions. Many national economies grew, but with limited structural transformation in their underlying economic geography. Most independent governments also retained the inherited institutional grid of the colonial state.

As a result, the economic geography of leading and lagging regions continued to “coincide” with the political geography of provinces, districts and electoral constituencies. As predicted by [scholars of comparative political economy](#), the coincidence of economic geography and political geography worked to politicise regional inequalities and bring these to the fore in national politics.

The ongoing cleavages that stem from “regionalism by design”

In a chapter co-authored with [Juliette Crespin-Boucaud](#), we use electoral geography methods to track regional clustering in constituency-level voting patterns in presidential elections from 1990s-2015 in 12 African countries. Using satellite data that record night-time light intensity (as a proxy for levels of regional economic activity) and crop specializations, along with demographic and health survey data to calculate disparities in levels of regional educational achievement, we show that regional voting patterns are largely predicted by the underlying political-economic geography described above.

Our analysis suggests that economically leading regions tend to be persistent strongholds of the leading political parties, while unstable patterns of **electoral clientelism** drive the shifting electoral alignments of constituencies in most countries' poorest regions. We take this as evidence of regional cleavage in national electoral politics, arguing that the party systems forged decades before, in the 1950s and 1960s, have tended to persist over time, along with the economic geography of leading and lagging regions that was established in the colonial era.

Other ways in which regional inequalities shape national politics

Beyond partisan divisions and the territorial cleavages that express rivalries between a country's most economically important regions (or between leading and lagging regions), regional inequalities shape national politics in various other ways. Core policy issues having to do with national growth strategy – where to invest, what sectors to prioritize, and trade-offs between growth and equity – often divide politics along regional lines. Regionalism can structure or influence debates over redistributive social policy, since there is a trade-off between targeting the most productive rural regions, and subsidising the poorest. Regarding land policy, promoting land markets country-wide may favour wealthier farmers in more productive regions but endanger the land rights of poorer farmers in more marginal regions. Questions of constitutional design and the decentralisation and centralisation of state powers have also cleaved national politics along regional lines.

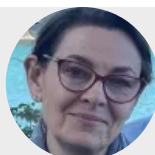
Inequality and Political Cleavage in Africa offers theoretical and comparative starting points for further analysis, rather than the last word, on many of the most pressing political economy issues facing African countries today. One lesson of this analysis of “the economics of nation building” is that regional cohesion policies can play a role in achieving sustainable development in African countries, just as they can in Europe and the United States.

Inequality and Political Cleavage in Africa: Regionalism by Design, published by Cambridge University Press, is out now.

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About the author



Catherine Boone is Professor of Comparative Politics at the London School of Economics and Political Science. She is a political scientist interested in patterns regionalism and political-economic development issues in Africa in a comparative perspective. She is the author of four books and is an elected Fellow of American Academy of Arts and Sciences and of the British Academy.

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