

The Impact of Political Patronage and Neopatrimonialism on the Nature of Political Systems in Post-Colonial Africa



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Received date: 12/07/2025

Accepted date: 26/11/2025

Publication date: 01/01/2026

Abstract:

The study of African political systems constitutes a central theme in the field of political science and international relations. It focuses on analyzing and interpreting the various elements involved in the political process, the dynamics of their interaction, and their overall impact on the political system. Accordingly, this paper aims to examine how political patronage and neopatrimonialism have influenced the nature of political systems in Africa. Employing a case study methodology and drawing on the framework of multi-variable and multi-level political interactions, the study concludes that the impact of political patronage and neopatrimonialism on post-colonial African political systems has contributed to the absence of a modern national state in Africa and the failure to organize state–citizen relations on the basis of citizenship.

Keywords: political patronage; neopatrimonialism; political systems; colonialism; Africa.

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Introduction:

The historical experiences that most African countries went through during the colonial period greatly influenced the transition from colonial domination to the process of building national institutions after independence. For many Africans, liberation from colonialism did not translate into democratic gains based on good governance. Rather, post-independence governance in many countries, such as Ghana and Liberia, reflected the dominance of military regimes that seized power through coups. In other countries, such as Zambia and Tanzania, governance was marked by the control of one political party, which limited the chances of genuine popular participation. In other places, such as Zimbabwe and Angola, rule was characterized by a personalized style of governance led by a dominant autocratic elite, which relied on repression, the use of force, torture, and imprisonment to neutralize the opposition, in addition to the spread of corruption, favoritism, and mismanagement of public resources.

Hence, the nature of political systems in post-colonial Africa was not concerned with managing public affairs in the interest of the African peoples and achieving development goals. Instead, it sought to control the political, social, and economic resources of the state within the framework of the duality of political patronage and neopatrimonialism.

Problematic

How have political patronage and neopatrimonialism affected the nature of political systems in Africa?

Hypotheses :

- The political systems of African countries during the post-colonial period are based on the duality of political patronage and neopatrimonialism.
- There is a relationship between political patronage and the nature of political systems in Africa, in the sense that the more the ruling power loses political and social legitimacy, the more it tends to rely on political patronage.
- The difficulties in building the modern state in Africa are linked to the pattern of patrimonial governance.

Methodology:

To answer the main research question and test the study's hypotheses, the case study method was adopted, based on the framework of multi-variable and multi-level political interactions. The study is divided into three main axes:

1. The characteristics of the structure of political systems in Africa: focusing on the impact of the colonial period on the structure of political systems in Africa after independence.
2. The impact of political patronage on the structure of political systems in Africa: addressing the concept of political patronage and analyzing its relational pattern with the nature of political systems in Africa.
3. The impact of neopatrimonialism on the structure of political systems in Africa: presenting the concept of neopatrimonialism, its stages of development, and then analyzing and interpreting its impact on the nature of political systems in Africa.

1. Characteristics of the Structure of Political Systems in Africa:

The study of African political systems within the framework of the multi-variable and multi-level political interactions approach relies on analyzing and interpreting the various official and unofficial elements and factors that intervene in the political process, the dynamics of their interaction, and the extent of their impact on the political system as a whole.

The African political system and its various administrative apparatuses in the post-independence period reflect the nature of the colonial system and its repressive administrative structures, which exercised comprehensive and absolute control over all the indigenous population, marginalized their participation, and served only the interests of European settlers. The colonial apparatus froze all the traditional social institutions in these societies and refused to allow the natives to exercise any form of governance or participate in social and political life, fearing that they would question the legitimacy or very existence of colonial rule (Hamrouche, 1981, p. 85).

In the context of the administrative and organizational apparatus inherited from the colonizer, and in the complete absence of any effective social or political organization or any social body capable of replacing the colonizers and assuming responsibility for managing government apparatuses (an organizational vacuum), the national political leaderships that assumed power in the country hastened to establish the state's superstructures with the help of the former colonial state. They imported Western political systems, and African political groups quickly adopted the traditional republican democratic model as the political system for their developing countries without regard to its procedures, its style of governance and peaceful transfer of power, or the different social and cultural structures of their peoples (Hamrouche, 1981, p. 86).

The situation in Africa is characterized in most of its countries by significant ethnic, racial, and religious diversity, which has, in one way or another, impacted state-building in Africa. The historical legacy created an uncomfortable

situation for African regimes in managing many crises, particularly ethnic ones—whether at the expense of other groups or at the expense of the sovereignty of the state itself. In many cases, this led to the failure to establish control over the entire territory of the state. Hence, the foundation of political, security, and economic stability lies in the structure of society and the extent to which the political system responds and adapts to this pluralistic reality, which African political systems have failed to do. They could neither create a cohesive social fabric within the state nor produce the citizen as a central actor in the decision-making framework (Abdelrahman, 2018, p. 25).

Although the project of liberation from colonialism was moving according to the principles of democracy and the ideals associated with self-governance and social justice, the emergence of a political elite that had been educated, trained, and participated in various social activities under an authoritarian and highly centralized colonial system affected their political behavior in the post-colonial phase. Post-independence policies were thus based on the logic of **neopatrimonialism**, within which state positions and revenues were distributed on the basis that the state functioned as a platform for capital accumulation and social control. They were also based on political patronage and reciprocal benefit relationships, whereby the African political elite managed to reproduce itself each time with different mechanisms and new faces, but with the same loyalty to the style of governance and management—i.e., monopoly and redistribution according to specific criteria (Adejumobi, 2003, p. 318)

The ruling political regimes in Africa undertook development as a fundamental goal at the moment of independence, with all the challenges and obstacles that this process entails. However, the internal weaknesses that these states suffer from—including corruption, governance issues, weak infrastructure, fragile industrial base, and globalization—prevented that. The economic growth model in African countries relies on revenues from mineral and energy resources rather than on a solid economic base of integrated sectors and activities. Africa holds about 90% of the world's reserves of chromium and cobalt, 50% of copper, diamonds, and gold, and between 15% and 30% of iron, phosphate, and oil. Phosphate is found in Senegal, bauxite in Ghana and Guinea-Bissau, uranium in Mali and Niger, diamonds in Sierra Leone, Ghana, and Botswana, gold in Ghana, South Africa, and Mali, and oil and gas in Algeria, Libya, Nigeria, and Angola (Shkima, 2020, p. 29). Therefore, the problem of underdeveloped African economies does not lie in the scarcity of energy and mineral resources, nor in the lack of capital—which is squandered without good governance—but rather in how to exploit economic, financial, and human resources efficiently and rationally to achieve sustainability. Most African states are characterized by corruption, lack of oversight, accountability, and transparency in managing their resources, which has led to the waste of public funds and failure to achieve the requirements of

sustainable development. The Ghanaian economist George Ayittey captured the essence of Africa's tragedy, describing it as a problem of ruling elites, whom he called the "hippopotamus generation," saying: *"The hippo generation is the ruling elite; they are stuck in their ideological theories, complain about colonialism and imperialism, and will not budge. If you ask them to reform the economy, they won't, because they benefit from the corrupt status quo"* (Abdelrahman, 2018, p. 25).

Thus, the pattern of governance in post-colonial Africa (both civilian and military) was not related to managing public affairs for the benefit of Africans and achieving national development. Rather, it sought to control the political, social, and economic resources of the state and to conduct political action within a relational pattern based on the duality of paternalism and political patronage, which had consequences for the democratic process, the construction of the modern state, and the achievement of national integration.

2. The Impact of Political Patronage on the Structure of Political Systems in Africa:

The *gift* constitutes a distinctive feature of a reciprocal relational pattern between two parties — giver and receiver — and thus represents a prominent aspect of the concept of mutual benefit or a form of patronage. This dynamic plays an active role in the individual's sphere of power, in capital accumulation, and in its horizontal exchange or vertical distribution. In this context, Abdellah Hammoudi starts from the idea that gift-giving, seeking closeness, and providing service — as an extension of the *sheikh-disciple* system — are among the most effective means of producing power and benefiting from its symbolic and material goods, as they define positions of sovereignty and subordination and ensure the continuity of the social and political hierarchy (Belhmiti, 2017, p. 504).

a. The Concept of Political Patronage:

- **Linguistic definition:** The word *patronage* (*zabouniya* in Arabic) is derived from *zabn*, which, according to *Lisan al-Arab* by Ibn Manzur, means to repel one thing from another, to stipulate, or to gamble over obtaining a need. It also refers to taking one's share of food (*zibni*), implying an act of pushing, stipulating, or gambling to obtain one's need (Ibn Manzur, n.d., vol. 13, pp. 194–195).
- **Terminological definition:** The term refers to a complex chain or network of relationships between political patrons or leaders and their clients or followers. Scholars have disagreed on a single definition of patronage. For example, Susan C. Stokes defines it as an electoral mobilization strategy, stating that: *"Patronage is the offering of material goods in exchange for electoral support, where the criterion the patron uses is: will you support me? Vote-buying — often called electoral or party patronage — is the usual scenario in which a candidate intends to buy votes, typically*

through intermediaries" (Ben Amer, n.d.). James Scott describes political patronage relationships as an *instrumental friendship*, in which the patron uses his higher social and economic status, influence, and resources to provide protection or advantages to the client, who is of lower status (Ben Amer, n.d.).

Thus, political patronage represents a mutually beneficial relationship between two parties: the patron, who grants privileges to the client in exchange for various forms of support. This relational pattern persists in political practice, particularly in newly independent countries such as those in Africa, where governance still relies heavily on personal relationships of dependency.

b. The Impact of Political Patronage on the Nature of Political Systems in Africa:

Political power in the so-called white-collar democracies is characterized by its individuality and its defense of narrow factional interests, which has contributed to its weak influence over broader popular groups. This reflects the dominance of ruling elites over the state's economic and financial resources. In most African countries, since independence until today, an elite has succeeded repeatedly in reproducing itself through different mechanisms and new faces, yet with the same loyalty to the style of governance — monopolization and redistribution according to certain criteria. Consequently, political power has remained distant from society. Ruling elites in most African states have created a close-knit group of beneficiaries of financial privileges, tasked with political propaganda within a patron-client relationship. Thus, the political game has become confined to a small number of distinguished voters — the so-called "limited electoral base" — which consistently reproduces the same political power. Meanwhile, this electoral base becomes an investment pool that benefits disproportionately compared to what the broader society receives in services and social transfers (Azzazn & Krayess, 2020, pp. 361–362).

Within this patron-client relationship between the ruling elite and the privileged group, society has turned into a large mass of people who nonetheless live on the economic and political margins. According to Max Weber, the ruling power's loss of political and social legitimacy has led elites in many African countries to seek an alternative form of legitimacy — essentially an agreement between the corrupt ruler and a minority (both modern and traditional cliques) acting as intermediaries between ruler and society. This is achieved through magnifying the image of political leadership, investing in revolutionary legitimacy, and employing populist discourse aimed at mobilization, distracting public opinion, emphasizing the external enemy, and postponing demands until after "state-building." This discourse contributed to the emergence of a bureaucratic class that monopolized wealth and paved the way for a new bourgeoisie or oligarchy (Azzazn & Krayess, 2020, p. 362).

The ruling system in most African countries creates "major clients" through parties, organizations, associations, media, and even intellectuals to legitimize its practices in exchange for the privileges they receive. These major clients, in turn, create second- and third-tier clients by investing money to buy votes and establish small loyalty groups — such as students and workers linked to corrupt businessmen, and a media army portraying the ruling power as strong and striving for national development. These groups collectively succeed in isolating the state from society and imposing it in a top-down manner (Azzazn & Krayess, 2020, p. 365).

Interest groups or political loyalty factions act as distinct categories pursuing their own benefits, defending their choices, and refusing to acknowledge any flaws or inability to continue marketing the system within the patron-client framework. Thus, despite deteriorating economic conditions and crises in key sectors such as education and healthcare, they persist in reproducing and defending the political system to protect their gains and enhance their welfare (Azzazn & Krayess, 2020, p. 365).

As a result, the ruling power in most African countries buys loyalties after having isolated society. Society, in turn, withdrew from political and electoral participation (political apathy), leaving the political game confined to a small loyalty-based group that controls the country's wealth.

However, despite the spread of patronage in African political systems, it has failed to prevent the emergence of awareness among societal groups, which have come to realize that public funds are being wasted without achieving national development. The ruling power has also been unable to reduce social disparities among societal groups. For example, in Nigeria — the largest oil reserve holder — a small elite controls production and wealth while the majority of the population lives in poverty (Abdelrahman, 2018, p. 25).

3. The Impact of Neopatrimonialism on the Structure of Political Systems in Africa:

The concept of patrimonialism derives its meaning from the model of patriarchy (the father figure), as found in traditional or pre-modern societies, in their political, social, and economic structures. It thus refers to two interconnected systems: traditional patrimonialism and new patrimonialism. The system prevailing in African states throughout the last century and into the early twenty-first century represents a hybrid of the traditional and the modern (Bouamer, 2020, pp. 564–565).

a. The Concept of Patrimonialism and Neopatrimonialism:

The term *patrimonialism* began to be used analytically in the works of Max Weber, who classified authority into three types:

- Rational-legal authority
- Charismatic authority
- Traditional authority, within which patrimonial authority is situated — a form of traditional rule where political power dominates governance and political practice is confined to relatives, friends, and clients. This creates a bureaucratic circle that preserves the ruler (the patriarch) through informal means, treating the state as if it were his household (Bouamer, 2020, pp. 564–565).

In its traditional form, patrimonialism rests on informal rules where patronage constitutes the core of reciprocal relations between patron and client. The concept of *neopatrimonialism*, however, emerged after Weber, particularly in African studies during the 1960s, as a development of the Weberian framework. Some scholars even preferred the term *political patronage* over neopatrimonialism. According to post-Weberian interpretations, *neopatrimonialism* is defined by Erdmann and Engel as a combination of two Weberian types of domination: patrimonial and rational-legal bureaucratic. Thus, neopatrimonialism represents a system in which rational-legal institutions are infiltrated and undermined by traditional patrimonial logic (Bouamer, 2020, pp. 564–565).

b. African Political Systems Under Neopatrimonial Rule:

Post-independence African states have been marked by patrimonial political features: personal rule, the absence of a distinction between public and private spheres — what Jean-François Bayart called the “politics of the belly” — with the ruling elite constituting a distinct social class within societal divisions, forming a web of dependency relationships, where corruption permeates the state, and power is monopolized by the ruler and his close circle (Othman, 2015, p. 47).

African regimes retained many colonial-era practices, especially repression and coercion, to achieve political goals rather than relying on persuasion and popular consent. Developmental ideologies served merely as a justification for the authoritarianism of one-party states. Consequently, those mobilized against colonialism found themselves excluded from real political participation. Civil society institutions, such as parties, unions, and popular organizations, were either deprived of autonomy or absorbed into state structures, while opposition leaders were eliminated. This allowed dictators to consolidate and reproduce their rule in a reciprocal, clientelistic relationship with their followers (Abdelrahman, 2004, pp. 47–48).

Jean-François Médard applied the concept of neopatrimonialism to the Cameroonian state and then generalized it to Africa. He describes the

neopatrimonial state as one where the distinction between public and private spheres disappears, leading to personalized power and a particular way of accumulating economic, political, and symbolic resources. The "big man" converts economic resources into political ones and vice versa, with power and authority treated as personal property. This results in weak institutions, arbitrariness, and despotism, as individuals, unconstrained by institutional frameworks, act according to personal whims. Hence, the neopatrimonial state suffers developmental paralysis because its leaders focus on power, position, and wealth accumulation, legitimizing their authority through resource distribution (Bouamer, 2020, pp. 566–567; Medard, as cited in Shalabi, 2020).

Médard argues that the defining feature of governance in sub-Saharan Africa is the mixture of bureaucratization and patrimonialization — a hybrid of tradition and modernity — where rational-legal bureaucratic apparatuses coexist with patrimonial, familial, and personalistic systems (Bouamer, 2020, pp. 566–567).

In practice, rational structures and formal rules coexist with patrimonial practices, undermining the separation between public and private. This hybrid system — which intensified during post-Cold War democratic transitions — allowed African leaders to adopt corporatist strategies for political recruitment while preserving their power (Bouamer, 2020, pp. 566–567).

The reconfigured patriarchal society in African states reflects underdevelopment. Although it exhibits modern external features, it lacks political awareness and organization, and modernization in this context often perpetuates backwardness by reproducing hybrid traditional structures (Sharabi, 1993, p. 24).

The 1990s brought apparent democratic transitions — "semi-free elections, peaceful transfer of power, abandonment of single-party systems" — but these changes were often superficial, aimed at adapting to internal and external pressures, and resulted in new hybrid neopatrimonial regimes. Leaders maintained corporatist recruitment strategies to ensure their survival. Some cases, like Benin, Botswana, Cape Verde, Ghana, Mauritius, Namibia, Senegal, and South Africa, achieved notable democratic progress, but these remain exceptions (Bouamer, 2020, pp. 566–567).

Corporatist states in Africa employed multiple mechanisms to sustain themselves, circumvent democratic transformation, and preserve their neopatrimonial rule:

- Amending laws and constitutions to keep power in the hands of the president and his family (e.g., Togo 2002, Uganda 2005, Democratic Republic of Congo 2011).
- Creating fabricated parties, civic organizations, and unions.

- Penetrating and controlling organizations to secure loyalty through integration and co-optation, using a mix of incentives and repression.

The Senegalese model illustrates this well: during President Abdou Diouf's tenure (1981–2000), he relied on youth, cultural, and union organizations he created, such as the National Support Movement and the Presidential Action Support Committee, whose members dominated senior state positions. President Abdoulaye Wade (2002–2012) continued these clientelist practices, penetrating student unions for political support (Bouamer, 2020, pp. 570–571).

The corporatist African state's survival strategy is bolstered by its control over natural resources. State rents enable material and symbolic domination, reinforcing the reciprocal relationship between societal weakness and clientelism (Bouamer, 2020, pp. 570–573).

Thus, the absence of a modern national state in Africa in favor of the neopatrimonial model has prevented the organization of state–citizen relations on the basis of citizenship.

Conclusion:

After independence, African political systems retained many features of the colonial regime, producing a relational pattern of governance based on the duality of patrimonialism and political patronage. This hindered the emergence of a modern national state, obstructed the organization of state–citizen relations on the basis of citizenship, weakened social forces, and eroded the legitimacy of the state.

The monopolization of political power over economic resources—particularly rents and mineral wealth—without achieving national development, coupled with pervasive political and economic corruption, allowed the ruling elite to become detached from society. Consequently, they relied on creating patronage networks that functioned as a political audience during elections, legitimizing and justifying the practices of the elite to preserve and reproduce the existing system within a framework of mutual benefit. This dynamic resulted in a fragmented society in which a small elite controlled production and economic activities, while the majority of the population suffered poverty, intensifying the rift between society and the ruling power.

Post-independence African regimes were shaped by patrimonial characteristics that blended rational-legal institutions with traditional logic, reinforcing personal rule, blurring public and private spheres, and concentrating decision-making power. The ruling elite emerged as a distinct social group within the social structure, which increased the alienation of the state and its leaders from the governed, who responded with passivity and political disengagement.

Thus, African political systems appeared institutionally hollow, characterized by personalistic rule, the absence of effective grassroots organizations, and the failure of democratic processes. Any meaningful reform requires the ruling elites to embrace genuine reforms aimed at fostering national integration, enabling democratic practice, and building a modern national state grounded in citizenship.

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