

How Do Africa's New Engagements Affect Governance?

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Africa's democratization began at a time when there was no real rivalry for influence on the global scene. In the 1990s African countries remained solidly within the orbit of the West. The move toward democracy, therefore, occurred on terms that were very much determined by the donors that helped finance African governments and their development efforts. 20 years later the scene is quite different. African governments tend to show fatigue with the pressures to terms that are little related to the continent's socio-economic circumstances and capability to democratize. The donor community is resigned to a haggling over the terms for continued aid and in many respects has lost its excitement about fostering democracy à la West. At the same time, other countries have entered the global scene as influential actors. China, India and Brazil as well as oil-rich Arab Gulf States are taking an increased interest in Africa's natural and mineral resources. Their concern is primarily economic and less focused on governance issues, whether they relate to democracy, human rights or any other aspect of the global governance agenda. When looked at from a Western donor perspective, the presence of the new actors is a threat to what these donors have been trying to achieve in the past two decades. African governments can play the interest of others against the West. Judging what is happening in Africa merely through the donor lens, however, tends to miss the dynamics of the globalization process in Africa. Particularly interesting is the rise of a new middle class - or bourgeoisie - that is not nested in the government but in the private sector. This group of people is more independent and constitutes a counter weight to the political class that has been allowed to dominate policy-making in African countries since independence.

This paper will pursue this argument using examples from the four East African countries - Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania and Uganda - to examine how far this argument holds in the light of evidence of what is going on in the governance realm.