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The Contentious Politics
of African Urbanization

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"See, here in Ghana we do not use terms like 'the poor,'" political party activist Bright Dzila explained to me in a 2012 interview about Accra's largest squatter settlement, Old Fadama. "That is what outsiders use, NGO workers and foreign governments. Oh, the poor. But these people are not all 'poor.' And they are benefiting from this land." He insisted, "It is not the way that you all see them."

Dzila's comments highlight the contradictory effects that urbanization has on African societies. Poverty is becoming more urban, and many city residents live in neighborhoods with slum-like conditions. But what this transformation means to people on the ground is different than what outsiders see. The urban poor are much more than an economic subset of people who lack sufficient living conditions and rights. They are also beneficiaries of—and contributors to—dynamic cities and neighborhoods. Far from being passive bystanders in the urbanization process, they are active participants in a contentious political arena.

Rapid urbanization is changing the African continent. By 2050, 56 percent of all Africans are expected to live in urban areas, up from 40 percent today. Already, an estimated 200 million people live in slums, or 62 percent of sub-Saharan Africa's urban population.

Expanding cities improve access to health care and education, but also give rise to new challenges in sanitation, housing provision, air quality, and social relations. Residents come into contact with people from different ethnic, religious, and class groups at work and in their neighborhoods. These daily interactions have the potential to positively change attitudes and produce new social contracts. But they can also create conflict between diverse types of people competing for limited resources, space, and opportunities.

Urbanization is radically transforming Africa's political geography at the local, national, and global scales. Megacities sprawl, while large towns and small cities emerge as economic centers and political strongholds in their own right. Private security forces in poor neighborhoods as well as those guarding gated communities interact with police and military units, reacting against and contributing to new threats. Growing African middle and upper classes are finding new investment frontiers amid expanding trade zones and improved intercity transport infrastructure.

Political decentralization and bureaucratic devolution create new arenas of decision making, enabling multilevel governance. In turn, small cities and towns face growing pains as they attempt to build equitable and inclusive communities with new influxes of capital and labor. Megacities like Lagos, Cairo, and Kinshasa are strengthening their ties to foreign governments and international capital. It is only a matter of time before Johannesburg, Accra, Nairobi, and Dar es Salaam join the ranks of the world's largest cities.

These changes all reflect the political implications of rapid urbanization. Urban expansion and the proliferation of slums place demands on city and national governments, while providing new opportunities for leaders to build political followings. Party machines establish dense organizational networks, reshaping social ties and power

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structures. Migrant communities make claims to land that often put them at odds with host populations in struggles over valuable urban space. Governments and wealthy landowners justify forced evictions and demolitions as necessary for urban development, but also use them as part of their strategies of social control.

CONFLICTING CLAIMS

Scholars and policy makers typically understand urbanization to be a linear process. The increase in urban population is often associated with economic modernization, industrialization, and bureaucratization. But this linear understanding is disentangled from politics. The concept of *contentious urbanization* better reflects the political dynamics that shape the process in today's world. Population growth leads to competing and often conflicting claims on a city.

While doing ethnographic fieldwork in Accra, I found that the city's growth process was a good example of contentious urbanization. Accra has grown from a small fishing village of indigenous Ga people into an ethnically diverse city of more than 4 million residents. Early town dwellers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries organized against the threat of inland raids from the Akwamus, another ethnic group. Strangers who moved into the city assimilated into Ga society, learning the language and the customs of the indigenous population. These practices changed when the British made the city their colonial capital in 1877. Their approach to municipal governance was one of indirect rule, based on the co-optation of leaders of Ghanaian ethnic communities. This became especially contentious when British municipal authorities began recognizing "stranger headmen"—leaders from migrant groups—as a way to divide African populations.

Competition over space heated up when the city experienced a population and economic expansion in the 1920s, as the price of Ghana's cocoa exports boomed and the land market was modernized and became more lucrative. Multiparty political competition intensified these rivalries during the struggle for independence in the 1940s. They persisted after independence was achieved in 1957. Political parties extended their mobilization efforts deep into the grassroots, relying on the urban poor for votes and recruiting youth to work as political foot soldiers. New tensions arose over the Aliens Compliance Order of 1969, which required the expulsion of all noncit-izens without residency permits. Migrants living in *zongos*—migrant neighborhoods in Ghanaian cities and towns—were directly targeted, politicizing citizenship and claims to the country and the city.

Over the course of Accra's development, poor neighborhoods like Sabon Zongo, Nima, Maamobi, and Old Fadama have been condemned as stains on the city and designated for demolition and relocation. As under-resourced and unregulated slums, these neighborhoods are often blamed for crime, disease outbreaks, and floods. They occupy valuable real estate that could mean profitable investments for property developers and kickbacks for politicians.

Residents have battled to stake their own claims to this urban space, aided by civil society groups that help them press the state for resources, human rights protections, and citizenship benefits. For example, Operation Help Nima was founded in 1968 to help residents resist relocation, while the People's Dialogue on Human Settlements defends Old Fadama residents against the eviction threat they face today.

Political parties extend their organizational machinery into these neighborhoods, promising to protect residents from eviction and deliver state services in return for votes. Ghana's National Patriotic Party (NPP) government recently commissioned two new ministries—for inner cities and zongo development, and sanitation and water resources—in an attempt to broaden control over poor neighborhoods. While these initiatives are certainly meant to improve urban governance, they are also political maneuvers to gain more electoral support in important swing constituencies. The prospects for sustainable urban development are embedded in larger political struggles.

LOCAL LEADERS

Urban settlements offer local leaders and their followers the political space to experiment with new modes of governance. Political entrepreneurs exploit new opportunities to expand their territorial authority. Marginalized populations seek incorporation into the state, giving rise to contentious politics between local groups and government officials. In slums, local leaders seek alliances with politicians to build up their power and economic bases. In effect, the underlying network of such social interactions and exchanges provides an important organizing logic for party politics today.

Party politics in African slums is embedded in forms of personal rule—an enduring feature of African politics in general. The goal of community leaders is to widen their social spheres, extending local-level politics as far as possible. They seek a group of followers to grow their authority from the ground up.

Local leaders establish territorial authority by founding new neighborhoods, taking in migrants, selling land as de jure or de facto landlords, and serving as representatives and spokesmen for various social networks and interest groups. Much of the struggle for political space hinges on the control of access to housing and tenure security.

In the absence of formal regulation and property rights, residents rely on strong leaders for their livelihoods. Local leaders own businesses like butcher shops, and they will provide stalls to newly arrived migrant youths and others in need of work. This gives leaders great political power and social status in the community, while also enhancing their wealth.

In today's multiparty environment, these local leaders establish patron-client relationships with political parties. In some cases, they serve as party representatives, municipal bureaucrats, or elected politicians. More commonly, they serve as brokers between politicians and residents on the ground. In Accra, they function through the well-organized machines of the major parties—the National Democratic Congress (NDC) and the NPP. The politicization of public services is one outcome of multiparty politics and the competition among community brokers.

These dynamics are most starkly on display during a postelection turnover of power. After the NPP ousted the NDC from power in 2016's national elections, NPP activists and foot soldiers immediately seized control of public toilets. In informal settlements like Old Fadama, their actions went a step further: they seized the homes and "bases" of previous community leaders, establishing themselves as representatives of the Old Fadama Development Association. They resettled NPP followers in confiscated homes and on unsettled land, while expropriating rents from NDC sympathizers who stayed in the community. Known NDC supporters no longer felt welcome or safe in the neighborhood. This process reversed the postelection

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activities of 2008, when NDC foot soldiers seized the properties of NPP brokers and established local political dominance.

Such local political practices take place outside the realm of official procedures; they are not regulated by any democratic rules or norms. Nonetheless, international organizations that support slum dwellers often prop up or romanticize these informal forms of governance. At the very least, they rely on the new powerbrokers to carry out their projects, entrenching the status quo.

But cities, and their slums in particular, can also be spaces of a new urban citizenship and sites of participatory democracy. In some neighborhoods, residents establish their own accountability mechanisms and make sure their leaders do their jobs, demanding development and public goods in the process. In other words, leaders serve the public interest and residents work together to enact meaningful change.

I found these dynamics at work in many neighborhoods in a rapidly growing city outside Accra called Ashaiman, where residents relied on reputational mechanisms of public shame and honor to hold their leaders accountable. A vibrant associational life emerged, as residents organized friends clubs, savings groups, and hometown and religious associations, building up social capital that contributed to community development. Much of this depends on peaceful coexistence between host or indigenous populations and the migrant communities that came to the city in more recent years.

POLITICAL MUSCLE

Africa's growing cities are spaces of extremely intense political party competition. As the continent liberalized its politics in the 1990s, cities in countries including South Africa, Kenya, and Ghana were the main settings for change. They were sources of the homegrown political opposition that would usher in an era of democratization. Urban political mobilization opened new avenues for dissent. The wave of democratization in the 1990s coincided with the development of an urban middle class and a burgeoning civil society in many African countries.

But urban slums also gained in political importance as parties looked toward poor neighbor-

hoods as key sources of new support. Political scientist Noah Nathan's research shows that even as a middle class emerges in cities like Accra, poorer voters continue to dominate the electorate and party organizations.

Slum residents are not just prospective voters—they are also valuable "political muscle." Political parties rely on party activists, foot soldiers, and "macho men" to patrol polling stations during voting and registration periods, attend rallies, intimidate opponents, and mobilize voters. Slums contain many youths working in the informal sector who are willing to "work" for the party on a short-term basis. In a 2012 interview with me, former Accra Mayor Nat Nunoo Amarteifio explained, "Political parties find muscle there. We [municipal bureaucrats] also had our own connections with them."

Politicians make strategic calculations to gain the political support of slum dwellers. In daily life, politicians visit slums to show sympathy for residents after fire outbreaks and floods, distribute food and clothing to vulnerable populations, attend funerals and weddings of local leaders, and pray with pastors and imams at local churches and mosques. The increasingly competitive electoral context gives slum dwellers leverage to demand their democratic dividend.

In the absence of formal regulation, residents rely on strong leaders for their livelihoods.

The electoral competitiveness of cities is further intensified by the decentralization of power and devolution of resources to local authorities. A glance at election results across some of the continent's largest cities shows that close contests are typical of their democratic politics. In Kenya's 2013 election, the winning Jubilee coalition lost Nairobi (county) by a mere 2.25 percentage points. It immediately invested in the National Youth Service to make inroads with the urban poor. In 2016, Ghana's NPP won by 4.5 points in Greater Accra, a region the party lost in previous elections. In Nigeria, Lagos remains competitive: the governing All Progressives Congress won the city in the 2015 national election with only 54.9 percent of the vote.

MIGRATION PRESSURE

The number of migrants in Africa (defined as people born in a different country) has doubled since 1990, according to data from the International Monetary Fund. By 2013, there were 20 million migrants in African countries, and the number is projected to rise with population growth, especially in the working-age demographic. The total of migrants is much larger when it includes new urban residents who migrated from rural villages within the same country.

Economically, migration is a boon to host societies, providing an expanding source of labor and tax revenue, and a creative class of entrepreneurs. But politically, new migrants place pressure on limited resources, including jobs and urban space. In the worst cases, as with recent events in South Africa, new migrants are the targets of xenophobic violence. Sometimes the state expels immigrants from the country, as happened in Ghana in 1969 and Nigeria in 1983, or restricts citizenship status, as Ivory Coast did in the 1990s. Such policies are enacted because migrants threaten the economic and cultural dominance of host societies and indigenous populations, fueling a resentment that political entrepreneurs exploit.

In Ghana, migration to urban areas has led to struggles over political control of the city. Ghana has experienced large-scale demographic change, particularly through increasing urbanization, for many years. But not all migration patterns spark resistance from host communities. In fact, most migrants are not perceived as threats to the social order.

In my ethnographic and survey research, I have found that when and how a migrant neighborhood was settled helps explain whether migrants are viewed as threats to established interests. When residents believe that the migrant community is illegally occupying urban land that is claimed by indigenous populations, migrants become targets of local political hostility. Far more than electoral politics is at stake: settled populations fear that they are losing control over their city to outsiders. While changing demographics certainly matter, it is the control of land and territory that determines which outsiders are perceived as a threat to host populations.

Politicians and parties tap into these narratives of "losing the city" to mobilize voters. This sense of livelihoods and a way of life under threat increases the stakes of an election. Residents often feel that the future of the city is tied to the outcome.

EVICTION AND CONTROL

Eviction threats and slum demolitions are tools that governments commonly use to curb the rise of informal settlements and establish social control over their residents. In 2007–8, the Center on Housing Rights and Evictions, a Geneva-based nongovernmental organization, reported that governments across the world issued 835 eviction threats affecting 4.3 million people just that year. States use such threats as tools to maintain the status quo.

In most cases, governments face no legal repercussions for evicting residents; occasionally, a case is taken to court in an underdeveloped justice system. The lack of legal recourse often leads to a state-community deadlock as residents continue living under the threat of forced eviction for an extended period of time. Insecurity and a lack of property rights become defining features of slum dwellers' everyday experience.

The local political economy also shapes demolitions and evictions. Justified by officials as responses to "public nuisances" or health crises, demolitions serve powerful political interests by targeting "illegal spaces" that are portrayed as morally objectionable, as geographer Asher Ghertner has observed in India. Governments often use demolitions to appropriate urban land and incorporate informal settlements into municipal plans. Operation Murambatsvina (Restore Order) in Zimbabwe, which began in 2005 as a nationwide slum clearance campaign, was a tool of state repression while also serving the electoral purposes of the governing ZANU-PF party. Demolitions in Kenya have been used as a means to punish opponents and reward loyal followers.

While forced evictions have recently drawn international attention due to the growth of slums in the developing world, the roots of tensions between states and slum communities can be traced to early periods of urban development in African colonial times. Ambe Njoh's research shows how African communities were ignored by city planning and largely left unregulated. They developed in an unplanned way, without public services. At the same time, colonial authorities used zoning laws and building codes when they sought to expropriate urban land for development purposes and tighten social control over native populations.

Similarly, governments today use the threat of forced eviction and demolitions to control poor urban populations. Often these threats also serve

an inherently political purpose. Politicians use the threat of forced eviction as a means of informal party building and mobilization. Evictions are used to show the strength of the state, strike fear in political opponents, empower the private interests of government insiders, or signal a modernist and global vision for the city.

Old Fadama sits one mile from Accra's central business district. It is an informal settlement that receives no government-provided services. Built alongside huge trash heaps, it has been under threat of eviction since 2002. Authorities claim they need to evict the "squatters" to move forward with development projects, and the nearly 80,000 residents do not have ownership rights to the land. Yet they make up a valuable vote bank in a highly contested electoral district. Residents' closeness to politicians and integration in party machines have emboldened them to demand relocation options and compensation packages, but the conflict remains unresolved.

Eviction threats offer politicians the ability to establish linkages with local brokers and extend their organizational capacity into large voting populations. Politicians then serve as "spokespeople" and offer security for these marginalized communities. They can also establish business relationships that bring new revenue flows to their party. As one community activist in Accra told me, "Behind the scenes, the NPP had our side. When we are tasked with anything, they provide us with information." These strategies are informal, circumventing official rules and regulations while relying on spontaneous organizing in the context of daily life.

Sometimes high-level politicians also use policies on slums to cultivate residents as a voting constituency, as was the case in 2011 when President John Atta Mills made it clear that "forced eviction in Sodom and Gomorrah [the nickname for Old Fadama] is not an option, and that any relocation must happen with a human face." His popularity in poor Accra communities soared afterward.

DEMOLITION DEVELOPMENT

Forced evictions and demolitions are now a normal part of urban development strategies in Africa. In November 2016, approximately 30,000 residents of the Otodo Gbame slum in Lagos were forcibly evicted from their homes. Otodo Gbame

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is an ancestral fishing village located on the valuable waterfront. The Elegushi family of local chiefs claims ownership and custodianship over the land by customary law. Politicians and developers maintain close ties to the family; they use these land claims to advance their own agendas.

As cities grow, property values rise. Informal settlements, like Otodo Gbame, often sit on valuable property. To complicate matters, indigenous families and customary authorities have traditional standing as custodians of the land. Real estate deals are often not documented in the official record; property rights and land titles remain ambiguous and insecure. In this case, community members suspect that the Elegushi family plans to sell the land beneath Otodo Gbame to developers who will build homes for wealthy people. The family allegedly hired thugs to evict the slum dwellers, set fire to their homes, and demolish them, with the backing of the police. When residents tried to put out the fires, the police reportedly fired tear gas and bullets, driving them into the Lagos Lagoon, where several drowned.

The action directly violated a recent court injunction that ordered a halt to the planned demolition of waterfront structures by the Lagos state government. While the slum dwellers appeared to have the court ruling on their side, the state government nonetheless moved forward with the demolition. The Nigerian Slum/Informal Settlement Federation, an advocacy group, sent a letter to the judge urging the importance of human rights, as well as emphasizing the residents' "right to the city." The group argued that "we belong to the city and we have a right to the city as well as a right to shelter and livelihood. Forceful eviction is not only unlawful, it is also ineffective."

The situation was quickly politicized. Officials offered their support for the demolition, despite the fact that most residents support the ruling party. The governor was slow to issue a statement, and the local government did not strongly defend the community. The residents protested and received backing from internationally funded human rights organizations such as the Justice & Empowerment Initiatives. Amnesty International issued a statement declaring, "The authorities involved in this destruction are in flagrant violation of the law." In November 2016, a Lagos State High Court ordered the state government

to consult with residents and provide relocation options before taking further action. The court found that the recent demolition was "inhuman and degrading."

While the residents are rebuilding, the struggle is far from over, since they still do not have legal ownership of their homes. In March 2017, Lagos state authorities allegedly violated the court ruling and demolished some 4,700 structures in Otodo Gbame without proper notice. The rest of the waterfront communities continue to face the threat of imminent demolition.

RIGHT TO THE CITY

The local political economy is at the core of the development process in urbanizing Africa. Political battles among international human rights activists, slum residents, traditional authorities, political parties, and governments play out in local communities. The outcomes of these struggles will shape prospects for sustainable development for years to come.

The future of African cities will include rapid population growth, new forms of urban planning, and massive infrastructure development. Megacities will sprawl and smaller cities and towns will grow into economic powerhouses. It is likely that they will open up to the world and a middle class will emerge as foreign companies move into these new markets.

But the African urban future will also be politically contentious. The "right to the city" will be negotiated by host populations and new migrants, political parties competing for votes, community leaders seeking to extend their own power over urban space, and property developers hoping to make a quick profit. Much of this activity will occur at the grassroots in slum neighborhoods, where the poorest residents make new claims on the government for state resources while fighting for a step on the ladder of social mobility. Like all processes of urbanization across the globe, the future of African cities will be a political struggle over ownership, control, and belonging in the city. ∎