

## **When Gold Rust: Politicians, Academics and Institution Building**

### **Abstract**

Politics is often misunderstood in public discourse and a misunderstanding of politics has underlined the enduring crisis of governance in Africa. This has spread into the academy (the universities) that is supposed to be the redeeming light for society, especially in moments of crisis. If politics is properly understood as pursuing the ends of the state through institution building, especially by those who exercise political power, we can begin to address governance crises and rescue our society. The idea of politics as pursuing the ends of the state through institution building enables us to explain how colonial rule has shaped the task and agency of the colonized, the role of the dominant elite in perpetrating or deepening contradictions in the institutional legacies of colonial rule, and why such elites have been unable to enforce innovative ways out of the development quagmire that exists in many African countries. This conclusion is derived from over two decades of engagement with institutions relating to federalism, intergovernmental relations, civil society and citizenship, elections and governance reforms.

Drawing on Weber's concept of responsibility, this lecture identified the absence of an ethic of responsibility as central to the failure to build strong institutions that are necessary to make politics work for the peace, security and sustainable development of countries in Africa. Institutions are strengthened when they are engaged; and such engagement requires an ethic of responsibility. Politicians have weakened or undermined institutions in Africa in their struggles for power because they lose sight of the goals of the state, and therefore have behaved as political infants, failing to pay attention to the consequences of their action. They have practiced seamanship without navigation. The seaman is concerned with keeping the ship afloat, while the navigator is concerned about taking the ship to a destination.

Politicians and academics must never lose sight of the long-term goals of society or ignore the consequences of their action. The powers of the state and its reach are so deep that those who exercise state power must recognise that they are capable of destroying their society. Transforming society in positive ways to achieve development and prosperity is a responsibility that can only be met by members of our society who act responsibly. The academy must become the centre of responsibility that will redeem itself and act as the beacon for politicians who should use state power to fulfil the promise of independence.

Political Science research should further engage institution in a broad sense, acknowledging its formal and informal components as two sides of a coin. There are several issues concerning institution building which scholars must endeavour to address in Africa. These include the design and functioning of institutions in relations to extremism, accountability, party politics, promoting non-violent political competition, controlling corruption and abuse of power, entrenching the rule of law; and advancing regional frameworks and principles of democratic governance within the continent.