

Sovereignty or Surrender: Confronting Africa's Comprador Class

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The political economy of post-independence Africa presents a profound paradox: nations that achieved formal sovereignty through anti-colonial struggles now find their economic policies dictated by external actors through sophisticated mechanisms of control. Kwame Nkrumah's warning that neocolonialism would be 'the last stage of imperialism' is upon us; direct colonial administration has been replaced by foreign financial and economic domination enforced through local intermediaries.¹ At the heart of this local and national structure lies the African comprador bourgeoisie – the class of educated elites who serve as transmission belts for neoliberal policies that maintain Africa's peripheral position in global capitalism. They talk like us and look like us, but they live in total disconnect from our national realities.

The structural adjustment programmes that have been imposed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank since the 1980s did not descend upon Africa without local facilitation. These policies required and cultivated a cadre of Western-trained technocrats who internalised neoliberal dogma and implemented it with missionary zeal.² The 1980s and 1990s were a period during which Africa witnessed a dramatic erosion of state capabilities and a decline in social sector investments throughout the continent. For example, from 1980 to 1995, sub-Saharan African nations experienced average reductions of 25–50% in real per capita health expenditures. These reductions triggered significant deteriorations in key development metrics, such as a 13% rise in infant mortality rates.³

What we see here is what Frantz Fanon foresaw in *The Wretched of the Earth* when he warned that the national bourgeoisie of independent Africa would become not the beacon but the brake on true liberation.⁴ This is clearer now than ever. In my homeland of Ethiopia, these elites have occupied key policymaking spaces to bend the will of policy not for their people, but for their masters: the financial institutions that demand their loyalty and service. They are the comprador class in flesh and bone, traitors with briefcases, selling out our future with a smile.



Faith XLVII (South Africa), *The Deconstruction of Value XIII*, 2024.

Our Chicago Boys

Africa's 'Chicago Boys', much like the economists who implemented 'shock therapy' in Augusto Pinochet's Chile under Milton Friedman's guidance, have been mentored in an ideology that fails to deliver the

economic transformation Africa needs.⁵ However, while Latin America's experience has been extensively documented, Africa's local enablers of neocolonialism have received less systematic analysis. Local technocrats are groomed through elite global institutions. Their authority derives from two ostensibly neutral yet deeply political instruments: conditionalities, which impose loan terms like subsidy removals and corporate tax cuts under the threat of capital flight, and 'technical assistance', through which foreign advisors are embedded in ministries to draft legislation favouring strategic industries. Presented as impartial expertise, these mechanisms transform local technocrats into arbiters of dispossession, ensuring that so-called 'reforms' serve elite and foreign investor interests while being masqueraded as national policy.⁶

Amílcar Cabral's revolutionary analysis of class formation in colonial societies is a crucial tool for understanding Africa's contemporary ruling classes.⁷ His concept of 'class suicide', where native elites must abandon their class interests to lead genuine liberation, stands in stark contrast to the reality of what Mahmood Mamdani calls 'decentralised despotism'.⁸



Younes Laarissa (Morocco), *Africa Angel #232 Artwork*, 2024.

The failure of this class suicide produced what Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o describes as 'a bourgeoisie that is not national but comprador', more wedded to global capital than to national development.⁹ Through privatisation, financialisation, and debt mechanisms, African economies have been restructured to serve global capital using subaltern elites (a class of locally embedded technocrats, policymakers, and bureaucrats in the Global South

that occupies positions of nominal authority within their national governments or institutions but ultimately serves the interests of global capital and international finance institutions like the IMF, World Bank, and World Trade Organisation). These subaltern elites of global capitalism sit in powerful places where their masters, international financial institutions, set the parameters of ‘acceptable’ economic policy, and these local technocrats are trained to operate within these constraints.

Africa’s subaltern elites wield power without true sovereignty, enforcing austerity and privatisation as ‘neutral’ policies, as previously stated. They serve as conduits for global capital, implementing IMF/World Bank demands while shielding elites from backlash. Though nationally embedded, their careers align with transnational interests, and they often transition into lucrative roles in international consulting or finance. Their neoliberal orthodoxy perpetuates dependency, blocking transformative economic change.

They are subaltern because they lack true decision-making autonomy, yet elites because they monopolise policy levers. They matter because they are key enablers of neocolonial capitalism and translate imperial economic designs into local policy while disempowering democratic resistance. Their role explains why ‘independent’ states remain structurally dependent.

Mechanisms of Subjugation and Local Complicity

The trajectory of Ghana’s political economy illustrates how a comprador bourgeoisie facilitated neoliberal subjugation, transitioning from Kwame Nkrumah’s socialist Pan-Africanism to becoming an IMF ‘success story’. The 1966 coup against Nkrumah, supported by CIA intervention as revealed in declassified documents, initiated the dismantling of his industrialisation projects. By the 1980s, Jerry Rawlings, once a revolutionary leader, adopted IMF structural adjustment programmes, privatising state enterprises and cutting social spending in Ghana.¹⁰ This shift was institutionalised through three key mechanisms. First, through policy capture, since the World Bank-trained Economic Management Team assumed de facto governance, sidelining ministerial authority. Second, through the implementation of debt as discipline, with IMF loan conditionalities prioritising raw cocoa and gold exports over industrial development, entrenching extractive dependency.¹¹ Third, through elite co-optation that neutralised opposition, as Rawlings’ former socialist allies were absorbed into consultancies and NGO roles, effectively sanitising dissent. Together, these processes reconfigured Ghana’s economy to serve global capital at the expense of sovereign development.

Ethiopia, long resistant to the neoliberal orthodoxies imposed on its African peers, has now succumbed to the same extractive logic. The consequences have been devastating. Once praised for its state-led developmental model, the country’s current financial leadership, made up of market fundamentalists in all but name, has embarked on a ruthless dismantling of Ethiopia’s protected assets under the guise of settling ‘legacy debt’. Both the governor of the national bank and finance ministry officials, eager for IMF validation, now execute austerity measures with an almost religious fervour, their policies mirroring the structural adjustment programmes that gutted much of the continent in the 1980s and 1990s.



Adlane Samet (Algeria), *Les mefiants* (The Suspicious Ones), 2017.

The pattern is grimly familiar. Public enterprises, once shielded as strategic national assets, are being auctioned off to foreign investors. The partial privatisation of Ethio Telecom and the opening of the banking sector to foreign capital are not economic reforms but acts of surrender, desperate bids to appease creditors while eroding economic sovereignty. The IMF, ever the stern headmaster, dangles debt relief like a carrot, conditioning each tranche on deeper cuts to subsidies, social spending, and labour protections. Ethiopia's financial elites, ever eager to please, respond with obsequious zeal, asking not 'why', but 'how high' when ordered to jump.

Meanwhile, the human toll of these policies mounts. A study by ActionAid reveals that Ethiopia is among the African countries hardest -hit by IMF-driven austerity, with severe cuts to public services that have

exacerbated debt distress and inequality. Fieldwork shows schools lacking basic supplies, with budgets cut by half and student-teacher ratios of 1:55. Healthcare suffers from chronic underfunding (7.1% of revenue vs. the 15% Abuja target) and severe staff shortages. Women bear the brunt of these cuts, taking up to twenty-eight extra hours of unpaid care weekly as services collapse. Despite the fact that Ethiopia lost \$213 million annually to illicit financial flows and allocated 6% of its revenue to debt repayments, the country's 2024 IMF deal entrenches wage caps and privatisation, further crippling essential hiring.¹²

This is not reform. It is recolonisation by spreadsheet. The same IMF that applauds Ethiopia's 'bold reforms' today will feign surprise when, a decade from now, the country finds itself trapped in the same debt-austerity-deindustrialisation cycle that has crippled Ghana, Zambia, and Kenya. By then, Ethiopia's economic sovereignty will be a relic of the past, another casualty of the false promise that there is no alternative to the masters' plan.



Fathi Hassan (Egypt/Sudan), *Candle*, 2014.

Beyond the Comprador Class: Reclaiming Africa's Revolutionary Future

The African liberation struggle must confront a dual enemy: the external machinery of neocolonialism on the one hand and, on the other, its domestic facilitators, the comprador class that functions as what Yash Tandon termed ‘the transmission lines for foreign capital’.¹³ Fanon’s timeless indictment rings truer than ever: Africa’s post-independence elites have failed to industrialise the continent, instead becoming junior partners in the systematic looting of their own nations.

This historical betrayal demands nothing less than an intellectual, economic, and political revolution. First, we must dismantle the IMF’s stranglehold on policy thinking by rejecting the technocratic model dominated by Western ideology that packages austerity as ‘reform’ and extraction as ‘investment’. Second, we must rebuild economic sovereignty through radical alternatives, proving that poverty stems not from lack of resources but from their organised theft. Third, the African Continental Free Trade Area must be transformed from a free trade façade for foreign capital into a platform for genuine industrial complementarity, rejecting the colonial division of labour that condemns Africa to eternal raw material exports.

The path forward is clear. External domination persists, significantly reinforced by local collaboration. Africa’s emancipation, therefore, requires not merely resisting foreign powers but dismantling the entire neocolonial mindset that has convinced so many of our leaders to ask ‘how high?’ when ordered to jump. True liberation begins when we rediscover the revolutionary truth that sovereignty is never granted – it is seized.

Warmly,

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Notes

¹ Kwame Nkrumah, *Neo-Colonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism* (Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1965), <https://www.marxists.org/ebooks/nkrumah/nkrumah-neocolonialism.pdf>.

² Firoze Manji and Carl O’Coill, ‘The Missionary Position: NGOs and Development in Africa’, *International Affairs* 78, no. 3 (2002): 567–83, <https://library.fes.de/libalt/journals/swetsfulltext/15872670.pdf>.

³ World Bank. *World Development Report 1993: Investing in Health*. (World Bank, 1993), <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/5976>.

⁴ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (Grove Press, 1963), https://monoskop.org/images/6/6b/Fanon_Frantz_The_Wretched_of_the_Earth_1963.pdf.

⁵ Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (Metropolitan Books, 2007).

⁶ Mkandawire, Thandika, and Charles C. Soludo. *Our Continent, Our Future: African Perspectives on Structural Adjustment*. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1999.

⁷ Amílcar Cabral, *Return to the Source: Selected Speeches of Amílcar Cabral* (Monthly Review Press, 1973),

https://abahlali.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/amilcar_cabral_return_to_the_source-ilovepdf-compressed.pdf.

⁸ Mahmood Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism* (Princeton University Press, 1996).

⁹ Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (James Currey, 1986).

¹⁰ Piet Konings, 'Unilever Plantations in Cameroon and Corporate Accountability', *Africa Spectrum* 38, no. 1 (2003): 71–91.

¹¹ Jeff Haynes, Ernest Aryeetey, Jane Harrigan, and Machiko Nissanke, 'Economic Reforms in Ghana: The Miracle and the Mirage', *Africa* 72, no. 4 (2002): 491–515.

¹² 'Ethiopia Urged to Abandon IMF Austerity as Report Warns of Crumbling Public Services', *The Reporter* 24 May 2025, <https://www.thereporterethiopia.com/45235/>.

¹³ Yash Tandon, 'Whose Capital and Whose State? [Review of *Class Struggles in Tanzania* by I. G. Shivji, *Underdevelopment in Kenya* by C. Leys, and *Politics and Class Formation in Uganda* by M. Mamdani]', *The African Review: A Journal of African Politics, Development and International Affairs* 7, no. 2 (1977): 104–24.



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