



Political economy of neopatrimonialism in East Africa: Insights from Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania

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ABSTRACT

Post-colonial political systems in Africa have been extensively analyzed through the lens of neopatrimonialism. However, this concept is often interpreted from a rational-legal perspective, which leads to the conclusion that it deviates from Weberian notions of statehood. Such a viewpoint has constrained comprehensive analysis of the structural manifestations, temporal adaptations, and implications of neopatrimonialism for democratic consolidation in Africa. This study employs the dual frameworks of political economy and neopatrimonialism as theoretical foundations, utilizing qualitative interpretive methodology to evaluate whether evidence from the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) project and other databases supports the rational-legal perspective on neopatrimonialism. Focusing on the original members of the East African Community—Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania—as case studies, the research demonstrates that elite control and personalized rule not only undermine democratic statehood and economic transformation, but also reveal that neopatrimonialism emerges not solely as a consequence of modernization failures, but as a coping mechanism rooted in historical legacies and socio-cultural contexts. Informal networks are found to be central to African politics and economics, challenging the prevailing narrative of inherently corrupt African governments. This paper thus advocates for a reconceptualization of neopatrimonialism as both an analytical tool and a heuristic essential for understanding the dichotomies between formal and informal practices in the politics of East African states. Consequently, it recommends that addressing neopatrimonial governance in East Africa necessitates reforms that transcend institutional formalism, aiming to disrupt entrenched informal power networks through context-sensitive, politically grounded, and empirically informed interventions.

Keywords: East Africa, Neopatrimonialism, Political Economy, Political Elites, Power Relations

I. INTRODUCTION

Since the 1960s, the two-fold legacies of colonial extraction and postcolonial projects of state building--that focused less on the development of effective institutions and more on survival of regimes--have shaped the political economy of the East Africa states, like other African states. Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Rwanda, inherited at independence bureaucratic institutions and territorial integrity not designed for participatory governance but for consolidating imperial control (Mamdani, 1996; Young, 2012). These states were characterized by elite-nationalist, largely socialist visions and pledges of change, but quickly degenerated into overdeveloped states with political strongmen, patron-clientism, and militarized rule (Chabal & Daloz, 1999; Hydén, 1983). The contemporary state machinery was overlaid with an informal power configuration, in which the exercise of rule was more and more not through de-personalised institutions but through webs of personal loyalty, the control of monopoly over access to state rents, and strategies of ethno-regional alliances. These were the conditions conducive to the consolidation of neopatrimonial forms of rule, the hybrid political form that spans the gap between bureaucratic, Weberian rationality and personalized rule. Since their independence, African states have been characterized as “neopatrimonialism”. This has not only been simply a descriptive enterprise, deep empirical inquiry has characterized the discourse, and today, neopatrimonialism is not simply a tag for African states. It is a measurable phenomenon with increasingly being agreed upon variables (V-Dem Institute, 2023; Sigman & Lindberg, 2017).

In addition, the neoliberal economic reform instituted in the 1980s and 1990s—principally by means of the structural adjustment programs (SAPs) implemented by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank—also played a large part in shaping the region’s political economy. These reforms, ostensibly to enhance the market efficiency and fiscal responsibility, culminated in general regression of the state from the important social



sectors to create new forms of exclusion and fragility (Mkandawire & Soludo, 1999; Harrison, 2004). At the same time, democratization pressures led to constitutional reforms, multi-party elections, and decentralization across the region. Rather than disassembling authoritarian inclinations, many East African governments co-opted these challenges, grafting informal power relations onto formal democratic order – a phenomenon Levitsky & Way (2010) characterise as competitive authoritarianism. This adaptability of power as resilience has maintained the continuation of neo-patrimonial practices, while regimes display certain liberal democratic norms, such as formulation of progressive laws, simultaneously.

The context upon which we base this paper is the fact that African states entry into the global political economy was accidental not organic. The consequent of this at the intellectual level, is an intellectual imperialism that transposed the very tools used to study states from the West to Africa. Consequently, the same expectations from the organically evolved Wetphalian states of the West were meted at Africa, with African statehood expected to operate in the same manner as the West's. As Kasera (2025c) argues, this historical understanding is important if scholars want to avoid (mis)use of notions such as neopatrimonialism. The present study argues that the vast majority of the notion of neopatrimonialism as operationalized under rational-legal discourses, an intellectual discourse that has led to the conclusion that African states are deviants. We point at data to argue that this has some level of truth, but is limiting because the nexus of formality and informality in what Almond called “pre-industrial political systems” is as complex than the rational-legal discourse with its Western-oriented toolkits can fully comprehend. The paper shows that for East Africa, like other African states, neopatrimonialism is not merely a relic of a pre-modern political system, but a widespread and strategic form of governance that is informed by both domestic political needs and global trends. It points out to evidence that shows that political elites have excelled at the art of institutional mimicry—taking on the rhetoric of democratic processes and liberal claims to the economy in order to win donor legitimacy and hold off internal constraints while at the same time preserving highly personalised structures of domination (Kasera, 2025a; Englebort & Dunn, 2013; Cheeseman, 2015). For example, in Kenya, the practice of ethnic coalition-building and distribution of patronage has become central to electoral politics (Mueller, 2014; Kasera, 2025b), while in Uganda, the militarisation of the state under the National Resistance Movement serves as an example of the fusion of coercion and patronage in a particular regime (Tripp, 2010) and in Ethiopia and Rwanda, technocratic developmentalism is juxtaposed with tight political control and restricted civic space (Bach, 2011) in what Bach (2011) calls “developmental patrimonialism.” These dynamics - insolvency gestured toward no-man's-land accounted for not by appropriations but by the pervasive presence of patrimonialism - suggest that neo-patrimonialism is not displacing formal institutions but infiltrating and ‘making anew’ them, such that the difference between legality, loyalty, and legitimacy is effaced.

The reason why scholars need to adopt an open mind or a critical perspective beyond the rational-legal lens is that in deed neopatrimonialism has its weaknesses, but to deal with its bad sides, we have to understand its structures, temporal adaptations, and implications for democratic consolidation. As such, the consequences of its governance logics for issues of state legitimacy, political accountability, and equitable development are profound. Even though there are regular elections and legal statuses change, the site of political authority is most often external to formal legal orders. Resource allocation, patronage appointments, and development priorities are often governed by informal networks and elite bargains, which subvert bureaucratic rationality and reinforce clientelistic networks (van de Walle 2001; Lindberg, 2006). Such a system creates a political economy where access to resources is determined by access to power, and where the state institutions are merely instrumentalised for private and factional benefit. Yet we argue that what scholarship should also take seriously is that such orders endure because not only do they serve elite interests, but they also provide a certain level of predictability, dispute resolution, and elite coherence within regimes characterized by weak institutions and socio-economic turbulence. So the durability of neo-patrimonialism in East Africa demands that we move beyond normative condemnation and start to explore the structural and relational construction of these governance systems.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

This study examines neopatrimonialism beyond normative connotations that largely see it as a deviation from the “right” political system. Instead, the study draws on data to argue that neopatrimonialism while is a deviation from what American prescribed democracy looks like, it is an adaptive, relational, and institutionalized and increasingly institutionalizing for of rule in Africa.. Since the early decades of independence, discussions regarding governance in Africa have kept knocking on the door of why neo-patrimonialism, as a centre of gravity, is the elephant that refuses to leave the room of institutional building, economic modernisation and democratic entrenchment. This literature—most famously represented by Bratton and van de Walle (1997)—frames neo-patrimonialism as a departure from Weberian bureaucracy and state rationality. The resulting picture is one of states in Africa as either inherently weak states or hybrid ones, where the personal rule, patronclientism and informal institutions are eroding what is formally a democratic setting. In such a tradition, political leaders are frequently framed as “big men” whose very survival is



predicated on the manipulation of ethnic loyalty, rent-seeking, and an undermining of legal-rational norms (Jackson & Rosberg, 1982; Médard, 1982). This normative focus has also underpinned donor logics, multilateral institutional prescriptions and comparative politics theorising. And yet though such narratives highlight institutional rot, they are often under theoretical of the structural logic, historical rootedness, and political reason of neopatrimonial logics as changing, temporalized norms and practice.

This study uses the cases of Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda to examine the limitations of normative discourses on neo-patrimonialism. The evidence used in the paper will discuss how normative criticisms miss how neo-patrimonialism functions less as an informal deviation and more as an adaptive, relational, and institutionalized form of rule. Throughout East Africa, from the trajectory of Tanzania's Chama Cha Mapinduzi (CCM) discourse of 'developmental state' to the continuation of military patronage and electoral legitimation in Uganda under Museveni, neopatrimonial strategies are not just residual but are constitutive of the way in which political authority is practised and justified (Booth & Golooba-Mutebi, 2012; Kelsall, 2013). The case of Kenya also demonstrates this logic: despite far-reaching electoral reforms and anti-corruption drives, the structuring of access to power and public goods continues to be heavily intertwined with ethnic-clientelist networks (Kanyinga, 2006; Cheeseman, 2018) which do not just represent deviations from the rule of law, but in themselves constitutive and critical for the survival of the political-economic enterprise. The study therefore examines the structure of the dense web of ethno-patronage that intertwines formal bureaucracy with informal elite deals, arguing that the resulting framework is not a lack of institutions but a coexistence, and often a co-dependence of, formal and informal rule. This 'hybrid' formation is a direct challenge to the binary formulation obviating neopatrimonialism as a governance pathology by nature—the implication being that conceptions of neopatrimonialism need to be rethought on conceptual, political and empirical terrain.

Consequently, in order to grasp the persistence of neopatrimonialism in East Africa, we need to transcend normative criticism and address the structural and relational logics that support these infrastructures of politics in situ. This article argues that neopatrimonialism should be viewed as constitutive of the political economy of statehood in East Africa—woven into issues of legitimacy, survival, resource allocation, and external relationships. Privileging a critical political economy approach and relying on empirical data from sources such as the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) project, the paper sets out to chart the emergence and workings of neopatrimonialism – not as a departure from democracy or development, but as a mode of rule that is contextually rational, historically sedimented, and globally entangled. It helps shift the discussion away from reformist moralism, informed by little understanding of how governance works on the ground, to an examination of how governance actually functions—disclos(ing) patterns, contradictions, and implications that are key to understanding contemporary statehood and political accountability in the region.

1.2 Research Objectives

The study will be guided by the following objectives.

1. To interrogate the conceptual and structural manifestations of neo-patrimonialism in Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania political systems;
2. To analyze the temporal adaptations of the structural configurations of neo-patrimonial governance across Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania;
3. To examine the implications of neo-patrimonial rule for democratic consolidation and developmental state-building.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Review

At the core of this research is the notion of 'neo-patrimonialism', which grew out of Weber's classic patrimonial domination, which used personal loyalty rather than legal-rational authority to exercise power. Weberian patrimonialism is the model in which ruler's power services networks of personal influence and is not indicated through formal bureaucracies (Weber, 1978). Africanist scholars subsequently had this core concept modified in order to incorporate postcolonial rule in a state context that was a synthesizing formal state bases and informal clientelistic and patronage ones. Clapham (1985) applied the idea to describe African regimes where modern bureaucracy merely served as a facade for personalized rule confronted neo-patrimonialism as a form of politics in which 'state-level elites monopolize discretionary control over benefits that they use to maintain power over clients. Erdmann & Engel (2007) later redefined the term to highlight the ambivalence of African states, in which neo-patrimonialism is not a fossil from pre-modernity but the result of a modern system that works through modern institutions. These contributions inform the understanding of neo-patrimonialism as more than simply a cultural anachronism or a lack of modernisation, but as a rational governance strategy that institutionalises informal power within formal structures.



To further this analysis, the paper utilises the approach of political economy of governance, which highlights the confluence of political authority, institutional design and economic organisation. Viewed not as neutral receptacles for democracy, or development, institutions become questioned in a Political Economy lens for how the power structure influences institutional design, resource allocation and rules enforcement (North, 1990; Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012). Such an inter-disciplinary perspective is particularly apt in the case of East African context in which, the post-colonial state has oscillated between centralized control and magnet-like external-driven reform culminating in hybrids of government logics. In this context, neopatrimonialism is seen not only as a deviation in need of correction but as a structural result of unequal economic inheritance, elite interests, and the instrumentalized use of formal rules to legitimate informal practices. So for example, in Uganda or Kenya, political survival depends less on constitutionalism and more on skills to navigate elite bargains, ethnic patronage systems and informal redistributive logics. With this framing, we can break free from simple normative condemnations of “governance failure,” and turn to the looking at the patterned rationalities of these practices.

Empirically, the analysis draws on the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) framework to consider how neopatrimonial rule is (re)produced in East Africa. V-Dem's offer a nuanced recording of the formal institutional design as well as the informal powers across different dimensions. What to pay attention to, then, is not so much executives' willingness to allow corruption to flourish (Medard, 1991), but specific indicators entailing elite corruption, political clientelism, rule of law, civil liberties, and regime accountability, all as proxies indicating that personalist standards and conduct coexist with democratic trappings. For instance, the clientelism index makes it possible to follow the degree to which political support is rounded up in exchange for material rewards while indicators of executive control and judicial independence show how state institutions are progressively de-institutionalized or co-opted. Through such indicators, the paper discerns similarities and differences in the politics of states which form the Horn, East Africa's "new frontier" and advances the cause of a more empirically based and comparative analysis of neopatrimonialism. The methodological decision also adds to the political economy approach by providing observable governance results that clarify abstract concepts.

Importantly, the paper also responds to major theoretical debates and criticisms about the neo-patrimonialism concept. There are also differences in opinion about whether it's an interim step toward more rational-legal forms of governance, a public policy hybridity that is a mix of modernity and tradition, or a path-dependent logic that limits democratic deepening (Mkandawire, 2015; Pitcher et al., 2009). Whereas neopatrimonialism may be seen as a barrier to institutional development for some, it is also credited with providing political order in fragmented societies, albeit at the cost of democratic and accountable governance. Secondly, neo-patrimonialism has been critiqued for being based in over-generalisations of African governance, masking agency, and re-producing normative biases against Western-states (Kelsall, 2011; Chabal & Daloz, 1999). This study takes these critiques to heart but suggests that contextualised, neo-patrimonialism is still a particularly formidable tool for explanation when used carefully in combination with the empirical precision of the V-Dem dataset and a structural political economy analysis. By locating the discussion in the East African region and its specific socio-political settings, the paper rescues the value of neo-patrimonialism and steers clear of its conceptual shoals.

2.2 Empirical Review

2.2.1 Neo-patrimonialism and the Political Economy of East Africa

Neo-patrimonialism has been a central concept in African political economy discussions, providing a critique of post-independence state making and an interpretive device for making sense of the “stability of authoritarian rule” and enduring underdevelopment. At heart, the concept serves as a critical juncture between political science and economic analysis, highlighting how surreptitious patterns of power influence the way resources are distributed, policies are enacted and state-society relations function. Indeed, academics have employed the prism of neo-patrimonialism to ask why many African states, having put in place formal democratic machinery and aligned with global development paradigms, have still failed to produce good governance and high levels of inequality.

A key contribution in this domain is Hyden's (2006) notion of the “economy of affection”, a framework that situates African political conduct within networks of kinship, ethnicity and local allegiance. These affective bonds, even as they have a socially integrative effect, frequently undermine the without-passion business of impersonal bureaucratic rule; necessitating that relational duties to another should be higher than institutional guidelines. In the formatized environment, the persistence of ethnic patronage networks was kept on shaping voting behavior and public appointments, as can be seen in the case of Kenya, where 2022 elections witnessed that electoral coalitions were not about ideology but about regional and ethnic alliances (Kanyinga, 2014). Hyden's point helps to explain why institutional reforms so rarely work out as planned: because they underestimate the power of informal, non-state logics that animate most political practice.

This is the more cynical but empirically more relevant view implied in Jean-François Bayart's “politics of the belly” metaphor. He suggests African political elites on both the right and left engage in a variant of primitive



accumulation, the process whereby personal wealth and power are accumulated through the state (Bayart, 2009). In this articulation, the state is less an arena of public service and more a place for “market-based” private gain in which loyalty is rewarded with access to state rents. Evidence to this effect is still apparent in modern East Africa. One example is Uganda, where routine accusations of corruption in the Ministry of Health during pandemic procurement in the time of COVID-19 clued the public in that even funds deployed in emergencies were sucked into elite patronage networks (Daily Nation, 8th May 2022). Equally, Kenya’s regular corruption scandals—with the most recent being the exposure of financial malpractice at state owned entities such as Kenya Medical Supplies Agency (KEMSA) in response to COVID-19—only lend support to Bayart’s analysis.

This view was provocatively advocated by Chabal & Daloz (1999, p. 13) in their provocative work, *Africa Works: Disorder as Political Instrument* when they posed the question as to whether disorder might be functional rather than dysfunctional. Weak governance or institutional failures are not a curse, at least not for the governing (Sudanese) people’ to the extent that it represents “a rational response to manage power relations and extract resources by elites. By design fomenting the blurring of the line between public and private, between formal and informal, they shape a political economy that revolves around a culture of ambiguity in which the responsibility is murky and the power is personalized. This way of thinking is in tune with recent governance trends in Tanzania, especially during the late President John Magufuli’s time in power. Though praised for his anti-corruption talk and populist manner, Magufuli’s tenure was marked by greater opacity of public spending and a systematic emasculating of oversight institutions, opening the way to an executive takeover under the cover of reformist talk.

Yet the tendency towards neo-patrimonial accounts has not gone unchallenged. One of the more vehement reactions is Thandika Mkandawire, who cautions against reductionist and Afro-pessimistic readings that represent neo-patrimonialism as a state of nature for African states. He contends that such templates of governance “risk pathologizing” African political systems, since they not only do not take into consideration the nature of historical and structural constraints that determine governance choices (Mkandawire, 2015). Mkandawire calls for a more realistic analysis that takes into account external factors such as the history of colonial extraction, the influence wielded by donor conditionalities, the pressures being felt in resource dependent economies and the geopolitics of aid dependence. His criticism is especially apropos given the recent onus of IMF-centred debt plans in Zambia and Ghana – where elite decapitation jostles together with oppressive lending mechanisms and ebbing commodity prices, its overreach shedding light on the inadequacies of internally focused explanations alone.

These debates highlight a central tension in the literature: while neo-patrimonialism is used to capture the informal nature of rule and distribution, it must be embedded within a wider global political economy of which it is a part. In contrast, recent scholarship has tended towards more relational and intersectional understandings with the domestic patronage networks linked to international financial flows, corporate extraction and transnational elite alliances. In oil-rich Uganda, for instance, the anticipated 2025 start of oil production under TotalEnergies has sparked fears of resource nationalism, militarization of extraction zones, and elite capture—a dynamic that echoes “resource curse” discourses as well as the reification of neo-patrimonial configurations.

2.2.2 Neo-patrimonial Structures, Forms and Dynamics of Change and Permanence

To date, Kenya exemplifies ethno-clientelist neo-patrimonialism in which democratic institutions are consistently subordinated to ethnic coalitions and elite deals. Since the KANU days, to the Jubilee Coalition, and the Kenya Kwanza regime, elite networks have consistently transformed ethnic identity into a form of exchange for political support as well as access to state resources (Arriola, 2009). The hotly contested 2022 general elections, in which William Ruto beat Raila Odinga despite support from a sitting president, has revived the intensification of the “hustler vs. dynasty” rhetoric—following a pattern of trying to reconfigure patronage through class populism, but not without its primary base in ethnic bonds. Seats at the ministerial and parastatal table were then handed out with stark ethnic arithmetic while the distribution of budgetary largesse to the counties was becoming increasingly reminiscent of the Moi-era politicization of such handouts to counties. V-Dem data demonstrates a worrying increase in executive aggrandizement and de jure deconsolidation following 2022, with institutions such as the IEBC experiencing partisan delegitimization. The increasing politicization of development projects in the name of the “bottom-up economic model” has only entrenched these clientelist tactics, with loyalty to the presidency often paid off with tenders and infrastructure projects.

Uganda, where President Museveni has reigned for nearly 4 decades, is an exemplar of militarised neo-patrimonialism on the continent. The National Resistance Movement (NRM) has transformed from a liberation movement to a patron-client regime which combines military loyalty and political sustainability. Since the 2021 elections — the runup to which saw violent crackdowns on opposition candidate Bobi Wine and widespread human rights abuses — Museveni has also turned to coercion to supplement patronage. The army and the police, stuffed with loyalists and relatives, are enforcers of regime continuity as well as conduits for the distribution of resources. V-Dem measures have registered steep declines in electoral integrity, freedom of association, and media pluralism since 2021,



resulting in Uganda being reclassified as electorally autocratic with constrained civic space. Economic benefits are contingent on military patronage, enriched through valuable stakes in oil, infrastructure, and security privatization that are allocated to regime-friendly actors. Museveni's latest anointing of his son, Gen. Muhoozi Kainerugaba, has further fueled dynastic succession speculation—a move that shows how patrimonial rule is becoming increasingly institutionalized in state organization.

Neo-patrimonial transition and continuity in Tanzania Enter Tanzania, which provides the complexity of neo-patrimonial transition and continuity. President John Magufuli's death in 2021 and the ascension of President Samia Suluhu Hassan led to early hopes of political liberalization and institutional renewal. But despite attempts to 're-engage' civil society and open up the political arena, the ruling party, the Chama Cha Mapinduzi (CCM), is still wedded to deeply clientelist networks inherited from the Ujamaa socialist period as well as the more market-orientated 1990s. Under Magufuli, the state took sweeping control over power focused around the presidency, used it to persecute political opponents and stifle media freedoms – under an anti-corruption banner. Suluhu's leadership has dialed these trends down, though the V-Dem data continues to yield sluggish progress in horizontal accountability and civil liberties. Moves towards your re-installment with regard to opposition rallies in 2023 too proposed constitutional reforms are greeted by skepticism as the CCM still controls state appointments, spending priority, not to mention grass-roots mobilization by loyalty affording. The Tanzanian experience is indicative of a blending of the old-party dominance with presidential rule—a typical feature of neo-patrimonial adaptation to reform pressures.

Rwanda, frequently lauded for its stability and its economic successes, provides an example of this paradox of technocratic despotism and neo-patrimonial control. Through the stewardship of Paul Kagame, the RPF painted a picture of efficiency, anti-corruption and security that was guided by development partners and technocratic elites. Yet opponents complain of a well-regulated political space, suppression of the opposition, and the concentration of power in Kagame and his close associates (Booth & Golooba-Mutebi, 2012; Golooba-Mutebi & Hickey, 2013). V-Dem scores for Rwanda are again high on bureaucratic capacity and rule of law but extremely low on freedom of expression, autonomy of opposition parties, and judicial independence. La répression récente des journalistes, des organisations de la société civile et des chefs de l'opposition (telles que les peines de 2023 d'opposants accusés d'avoir fomenté un insurrection) est un exemple illustrant l'instrumentalisation des institutions formelles au profit d'une logique de règne personnel. That Kagame's rule might be extended beyond 2024, a prospect enabled by a highly contested 2015 constitutional revision, here is the focus where electoral processes are captured and turned into a means of perpetuating long-term domination — a project represented in technocratic language yet based on patrimonial consolidation.

The Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) project has revolutionized the study of neo-patrimonial governance, providing finely grained, historically contextualized, multi-dimensional data that measures not only formal institutions, but also informal power (V-Dem Institute, 2023). While traditional indices do provide governance scores that are summaries of aggregate performance (e.g. the World Bank's Worldwide Governance Indicators or Freedom House democracy ratings), V-Dem disaggregates more than 350 indicators on electoral integrity, executive constraints, civil liberties, political participation, and corruption (V-Dem Institute, 2023). The empirical nuance is especially helpful in East African cases, where regimes more commonly have a democratic facade, and instead practice clientelist and personalized rule, informal institutions having crystallized around power centralization.

The V-Dem's Clientelism Index, for example, permits researchers to track the ongoing prevalence of non-programmatic political transactions — votes (and loyalty) in exchange for jobs, contracts or services. In Kenya, the index remains high throughout with spikes coinciding with electoral cycles — confirming the importance of patronage in sustaining coalition governments. Institutions The 2022 general election was marked by the resurgence of elite federations and regional mobilizations under the aegis of the Kenya Kwanza coalition that V-Dem data noted were related to low programmatic cohesion as well as rising levels of political cooptation on the basis of contributions and ethnic arithmetic. Some in similar vein, 198 Uganda's long-held score for Executive Corruption was still one of the worst in the region, with the military and security agencies heavily involved in off-budget expenditure and non-transparent procurement deal fallout from the 2021 elections and the regime's post-COVID spending splurge. These measures add to qualitative evidence on regime durability and coercive stability during Museveni's rule.

The third V-Dem measure for judicial independence (an aggregative indicator for Horizontal accountability, which represents the oversight by the judiciary, legislature, and independent bodies in the V-Dem framework) has also been instrumental in shedding light on the democratic erosion in East Africa. Uganda and Kenya demonstrate diminishing accountability patterns, where parliaments are diminishing to serving executive interests, sometimes through carrots and sticks of party discipline. In Kenya, this was observable in the recent debates over the 2023 budget, in which executive-authored fiscal frameworks sailed through the National Assembly without much opposition interrogation despite widespread public concern over debt and subsidy reversals. Tanzania, on the other hand, exhibits mixed patterns, with a temporary improvement in civil liberties under President Samia Suluhu in 2022, when political rallies resumed and some press freedom was allowed, followed by a reversal in 2023 as the ruling CCM reasserted



internal party discipline and slowed constitutional reform. Terms like these were picked up by V-Dem's Civil Liberties and Freedom of Expression measures, which reveal wild year-on-year swings, suggesting a great deal of institutional volatility beneath an appearance of stability.

A major methodological strength in V-Dem is its focus on 'de facto' governance practices, not only constitutional or legal frameworks, by which it uncovers the game's informal rules—such as elite pacts, military-business alliances, and regional clientelist enclaves—that define East African statecraft but are frequently left out by legalistic or procedural metrics of democratization (V-Dem Institute, 2023). As Teorell and Lindberg (2021) contend, the incorporation of these empirically anchored, context-sensitive data points provides a more nuanced understanding of democratic quality, regime change, and neo-patrimonial logics. Similarly, the fact that Rwanda consistently scores at or near the top of the rankings on Bureaucratic Quality and Rule Implementation is balanced by the fact that it ranked at the bottom three positions on two out of three of the indicators on Opposition Party Autonomy and Media Freedom, highlighting the gulf between technocratic action and participatory democracy. This empirical evidence contradicts simple dichotomies of regimes which are said to be either democratic or authoritarian, rather revealing grey zones and hybrid regimes such as one finds in present day East Africa.

Finally, V-Dem allows us to escape anecdotal or too-generalised characterisations of neo-patrimonialism, offering time-series data, cross-national and subnational variation. For the purpose of this article—to chart and probe the staying power of informal power within ostensibly democratic institutions—V-Dem data supplies both the conceptual and methodological toolkit required for empirical accuracy. This paves the way for more exploratory, inductive, and policy-relevant studies of governance trajectories, elite conduct, and democratic backsliding in East Africa.

III. METHODOLOGY

This article utilizes a qualitative meta-analytical method in conjunction with other literature by exploring the manifestation of neo-patrimonial governance East Africa. The approach relies upon aggregating information from available peer-reviewed journal articles, regional policy reports, and empirical data and develops a comparative interpretive analysis. In contrast with typical field-based work, meta-analysis here is not Stouffer-like analytic but, rather, conceptual—seeing patterns, inconsistencies, and lessons in a set of curated scholarly and empirical works. This approach is relevant in studies that seek to understand diffuse and nebulous governance phenomena such as neo-patrimonialism by recognizing the need for empirical anchorage and interpretive subtlety. The meta-analytical component enables the study to pull together various types of evidence—whether tracing continuities from the past of elite rule to the recent past under populist or technocratic governments, or contributing to a theoretically informed debate on African political economy.

The sources of data featured throughout are academic, peer-reviewed articles found in leading journals in the fields of African studies, comparative politics, and governance, as well as empirically-specific indicators in the V-Dem dataset such as the clientelism index, the executive corruption index, and measures of horizontal accountability. Where appropriate, the study also makes use of Afrobarometer survey data to 'triangulate' elite-oriented narratives with popular perception patterns, especially with respect to confidence in institutions, corruption and democratic accountability. This is complemented with analysis of regional policy documents such as the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM) and the African Union's governance indexes which contextualise findings within the African policy setting. The first country set selection is purposive, with the contrasting but inter-related political histories of Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania providing the core comparative group. Rwanda is added strategically to complicate the generalizations and experiment with outlier forms of government. Via the disaggregated measures of V-Dem and critical comparative readings, the study deconstructs the articulation of formal institutions and informal political logic and provides a valuable framework for understanding neopatrimonialism along lines that are not deterministic or ahistorical.

IV. FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

4.1 Structural Manifestations of Neopatrimonialism in East Africa

The analysis undertaken in this study shows that neo-patrimonialism in East Africa is not just a deviation from Weberian bureaucracy, but an articulated and institutionalized governance logic that simultaneously survives and undermines formal state institutions. Following from Weber's classical concept of patrimonial rule (rule that sat on personal commitment as opposed to impersonal legality) (Weber 1978) and its refinement by authors such as Clapham (1985), Erdmann & Engel (2007) and Bratton & van de Walle (1997), this article demonstrates that in East Africa states, political power is organised not so much according to the practice of the rule of law or the existence of formal institutions as by way of embedded informal networks. These range from patronage or clientelism to ethnic solidarities



and personal command networks. These are what Erdmann & Engel (2007) refer to as the "dualism" and Mamdani (1996) calls "bifurcation" of African governance, whereby one can observe both formal bureaucratic institutions and informal political logics in action. Far from being a residue of pre-modern governance, neo-patrimonialism is in fact a viable and even arguably a rational mode of power structure, especially in situations where formal institutions are either weak, or co-opted by elites.

This article extends that theorizing empirically by grounding the analysis on a framework in which to measure neo-patrimonialism's structural persistence. The Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) project offers a multidimensional data set on which to draw comparisons across political systems. Sigman & Lindberg (2017) and Coppedge et al. (2023) writing under the V-Dem Project use the Project's clientelism index, the executive corruption index as well as the various measures of horizontal accountability to test how informal practices play out institutionally in Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania. These indicators in Kenya point to strong ethnically-driven clientelism in which electoral competition is frequently organized around the basis of ethnic alliances. Uganda's data indicate that there is highly patronage oriented dynamics in the military and executive characterized by the hogging of power under the presidency that is granted support by loyalty-inclined appointments. Less ethnically divided (in Tanzania at least), the evidence there points to a highly dominant executive and the distributive role played by bureaucratic loyalty to the state. Together, these trends reinforce the argument that neo-patrimonialism in East Africa is deeply institutionalized and analytically measurable – not just tokenistic or symptomatic of underdevelopment. In fact, analyzing whether neopatrimonialism impedes democracy in Africa's Eastern region, Sigman & Lindberg (2017) concludes:

"We show that, contrary to conventional wisdom, African regimes vary both quantitatively and qualitatively in their embodiment of neopatrimonial rule. More-over, we find no clear evidence indicating that neopatrimonialism necessarily impedes the advancement or survival of democracy" (p. 1).

In addition, the photo is enhanced by both the Afrobarometer (2022) survey and the Africa Peer Review Mechanism (APRM) report, which anchors the trends in citizens' opinion and official state appraisals. Across all three countries, large shares of the public express little trust in public institutions, believe impunity is common among the high and the mighty, and are dubious about the fairness of political appointments, conclusions which are confirmed very firmly by Lindberg (2003). These perceptions suggest that formal democratic contexts are not immune or isolated from the continuation of informal power logics. For example, 84% of Ugandans think the military has too much influence in politics, and in Kenya, 73% of citizens find political parties to be ethnic elites' vehicles instead of policy competition. These results support Erdmann & Engel's claim that neo-patrimonialism is a rational and stable form of rule in much of Africa. They also corroborate Chabal & Daloz's (1999) argument that political chaos in Africa is not a coincidence, but a means of survival for elites to maximize control.

This empirical triangulation also reveals the conceptual confines of dominant readings that consider neo-patrimonialism as a mere transition or derivative of democratic norms. As other scholars such as Mkandawire (2015) have cautioned, the uncritical use of the language of neopatrimonialism as a "catch-all" diagnosis may, in fact, be misleading, as it can detract attention from specific political rationalities on the ground and from structural contexts in which these systems develop. Using micro-data and citizen-based measurements allows this study to overcome such reductionism. Neo-patrimonialism, it demonstrates, is not just a mode of elite survival, but a set of principles which inform state organisation. Courts, legislatures, and anti-corruption commissions being shaped by different logics, formal institutions of governance (such as courts, legislatures, anti-corruption commissions) are commonly designed to either accommodate (or be circumvented with relative ease) by casual logics of power. The study therefore has a conceptual contribution in suggesting a measurement model which reflects the multi-layered, contradictory and adaptive nature of neo-patrimonial governance.

It thus cracks its first research question and adds to an emergent political economy literature that is re-theorizing African governance beyond the pathologizing optic of institutional failure. By scaling and interpreting neo-patrimonialism as an institutionalised and rational governance strategy, the analysis moves attention away from normative criticism towards empirical explanation. But it acknowledges that their longevity is not based on their refusal to be modern but in their adaptation to sociopolitical and economic conditions. Thus, neo-patrimonialism in East Africa should not be seen as a lingering vestige of traditionalism, but as a historical and contingent – hence modern – form of power relations, enmeshed in global capitalistic constraints and local governing imperatives.

4.2 Temporality of Neopatrimonialism in East Africa

Crucially, one of the value-added components of this study is to have mapped the existence of continuities and adaptations within the performance of neo-patrimonialism across East Africa. The study reveals that it is hardly a matter of random or contingent changes, but rather a matter of changing strategies for the constitution of elite unity and elite survival and legitimation in the face of both pressure for internal reform from below and for democratization from abroad.



In Kenya, constitutional changes effected through the 2010 Constitution introduced devolution that was lauded as a move toward democratization and lessening of ethnic patronage. But the finding of this study is that the formal institutions have changed their architectural forms, but their neopatrimonial logic remains the same after more than three decades of independence. As late as 2006 have shown (see Murunga & Nasong'o, 2006; Kanyinga 2006; Cheeseman et al., 2016) have contended, however, that instead of national ethnic patron-clientelistic practices being adopted at subnational level as argued by Posner, what has taken place in Kenya is the decentralisation of ethnic clientelism, or what I call the establishment of mini neopatrimonial states; local elites hijack devolved institutions to mimic the sharing of resources and the loyalty to political and ethnic groups experienced at national level. Reports of the Auditor General (2013–2022) point to this trend: misuse and wastage of funds, unbudgeted for expenditure and questionable procurement practices in Kenyan counties (Auditor General Reports, 2013 – 2022). In other words, instead of breaking the machine (as it is often hoped for neopatrimonialism), institution-building has done no more than dislocate and disperse the machine in new directions.

This trajectory is also supported by the V-Dem data. Measures of horizontal accountability, civil society space, and electoral competition show a paradoxical pattern: Competitive elections are held in Kenya and the space for civic participation is vibrant, but these formal democratic characteristics are undermined by informal political representation on ethnic lines and elite pacts. The Afrobarometer (2022) data suggest that over 70 percent of Kenyan citizens view political parties as ethnically based, enhancing the perception that elections serve less as instruments of popular choice than a way to settle scores among the political elite. The Kenyan example illustrates, then, a type of neo-patrimonialism's strategic pivoting: elites do not change the ways they do business in light of new institutional tools so much as they co-opt the very spaces of reform designed to rein them in.

It's a different path and one where neopatrimonialism has been militarised in Uganda. Under President Museveni, political durability has not been accomplished through institutional advancement, but rather by intensifying coercive and unsanctioned power channels. As Tripp (2010), Rubongoya (2007) and Mwenda (2007) argue, a combination of military patronage, dynastic succession planning, and executive hegemony have allowed the Ugandan regime to become entrenched. V-Dem indicators reveal a systemic decrease in executive constraints, judicial independence, and media freedom, particularly after the annulment of presidential term and age restrictions. These changes have eroded institutional checks in favor of informal networks based on military loyalty and regional patronage. This situation is further complicated by an increasingly pernicious blending between neopatrimonialism and state coercive capacity; 84% of Ugandans, for example, report that the military has too much influence on political life (Afrobarometer 2022). The APRM (2019) also makes the same point and highlights lack of transparency and sidelining of civil society players.

In Tanzania, neopatrimonialism has developed into a bureaucratic type especially during the tenure of President John Magufuli. Though Magufuli's tenure was characterized by rhetoric promoting anti-corruption and effectiveness, the reality was higher levels of executive control, all under the guise of technocratic populism. V-Dem data indicate decreasing scores in civil liberties and democratic accountability, though the Afrobarometer (2022) reveals high levels of public satisfaction with service delivery. This paradox illustrates a recalibrated neopatrimonialism which replaces participatory accountability with performance legitimacy. To some extent, this interpretation is supported by the APRM (2013) report on Tanzania, which cautions against elite capture of CCM structures and institutional constraints to judicial independence.

When combined, these country-specific patterns suggest that, while the forms of neopatrimonialism differ, the underlying logic—personalised rule, elite survival, and informal control of resources—is strikingly similar. Whether by mobilizing along ethnic lines, buying loyalties in the military, or obtaining support in the bureaucracy, elites are maintaining and not dismantling informal agents of rule in the region. This result is the most direct response to the second research question and corroborates the theoretical claims of Bayart (2009) and Chabal & Daloz (1999) that clientelism and chaos in African politics serve as governing strategies, rather than institutional decay. By situating these continuities and changes in a wider political economy framework, this article highlights the significance of studying neopatrimonialism not as a static legacy of tradition, but as a developing, context-specific rule strategy.

4.3 Implications of Neo-Patrimonialism for Democratic Consolidation and Developmental State-Building

The central thesis of this study—that neo-patrimonialism should be understood not solely as a pathological deviation from democratic norms but as a rational and adaptive logic of governance—finds substantial confirmation in the comparative findings across Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania. This reconceptualization challenges the long-standing tradition in African political analysis, typified by Bratton and van de Walle (1997) and Jackson & Rosberg (1982), which frames neo-patrimonialism as inherently detrimental to state building and democracy. These foundational texts emphasize personal rule, rent-seeking, and ethnic favoritism as governance anomalies, yet the empirical evidence from this study suggests that such logics are not only pervasive but also structurally functional within the political economies of East Africa. Building on alternative framings by Booth & Golooba-Mutebi (2012) and Kelsall (2013),

this study contends that neo-patrimonialism is not merely an obstacle to democratic progress but a mechanism through which regimes manage elite consensus, control dissent, and allocate resources under conditions of structural constraint and historical legacies of colonial fragmentation.

In Kenya, for instance, while devolution and constitutional reforms were designed to foster transparency, participatory governance, and horizontal accountability, their practical outcomes have largely reproduced localized variants of the same neopatrimonial dynamics found at the national level. Auditor General reports between 2013 and 2022 consistently highlight misuse of public funds, nepotistic appointments, and irregular procurement practices at the county level, illustrating how decentralization has created new arenas for patronage rather than dismantling it. The persistence of ethnically aligned political parties, confirmed by Afrobarometer (2022) data and supported by V-Dem indicators on low horizontal accountability, shows that elections continue to serve as elite negotiation tools rather than channels of public responsiveness. This means that democratic institutions are not necessarily hollow, but are strategically used to legitimate informal power bargains. Thus, the implication is not that Kenya is failing to democratize in the formal sense, but that democratization is subordinated to a more durable logic of clientelist adaptation and elite maintenance.

Uganda provides a particularly stark example of how neopatrimonialism undermines democratic consolidation while ensuring regime survival. The fusion of military and political authority, reinforced by long-term incumbency and constitutional amendments that removed presidential term and age limits, demonstrates a clear shift toward entrenched autocracy cloaked in the trappings of electoral legality. As the V-Dem data illustrates, indicators for judicial independence, executive constraints, and electoral competitiveness have sharply declined since the mid-2000s, even as formal elections continue to be held. Afrobarometer (2022) confirms that a significant majority of Ugandans believe the military exercises undue influence in governance, and APRM (2019) findings affirm limited institutional accountability and shrinking civic space. These findings underscore that neopatrimonial rule in Uganda operates through coercive capacity as much as through elite patronage, thus rendering formal reforms superficial. From a developmental state-building perspective, this structure stifles innovation, pluralism, and long-term policy coherence by prioritizing regime continuity over institutional evolution.

In Tanzania, the legacy of bureaucratic rationalism under the CCM has taken on a more technocratic and populist character, especially under President Magufuli. While the anti-corruption drive improved public satisfaction with service delivery, as reported in Afrobarometer (2022), the underlying logic of executive centralization and informal patronage remained unaltered. APRM (2013) pointed to the risk of elite capture and limited judicial autonomy, warnings that came to fruition under a regime that curtailed opposition activity and civil society mobilization. As Cheeseman (2018) demonstrate, Magufuli's rule exemplified a recalibrated form of neopatrimonialism, where performance legitimacy served as a substitute for participatory accountability. V-Dem metrics reveal deteriorating civil liberties and constrained media freedoms despite increased public sector efficiency. The implication is that Tanzania's developmental success under neopatrimonial logics does not follow the normative expectations of good governance; rather, it illustrates how centralized control and selective clientelism can deliver certain development outcomes while simultaneously undermining political pluralism and democratic deepening.

Taken together, these country-level dynamics affirm that neo-patrimonialism, far from disappearing in the face of democratization or development reforms, continues to evolve in form and function. While the manifestations differ—ethnic clientelism in Kenya, militarized patronage in Uganda, bureaucratic populism in Tanzania—the underlying pattern is consistent: informal power structures dominate decision-making and resource distribution, often at the expense of institutional legitimacy. As such, democratic consolidation remains superficial when institutions exist primarily to validate elite bargains rather than to mediate popular representation. These findings support the view advanced in the literature by Bayart (2009), Chabal & Daloz (1999), and Mkandawire (2015), who argue that informality and disorder are not failures of African governance but adaptive strategies in politically constrained environments.

For policymakers, the implication is clear: governance reforms must go beyond institutional form to address the informal networks that subvert them. Donor-driven efforts that emphasize capacity-building or anti-corruption without recognizing the political utility of patronage are likely to be co-opted or rendered ineffective. For scholars, this analysis encourages a shift from evaluating governance through liberal-democratic benchmarks toward a political economy lens that situates neopatrimonialism within broader structures of power, legitimacy, and resource control. Developmental aspirations in East Africa must contend with the reality that neopatrimonial systems, while constraining in some respects, are also mechanisms through which political order is maintained. To imagine alternatives, therefore, requires not simply institutional engineering but a reconfiguration of the social contracts and power relations that sustain neopatrimonialism itself.



V. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Conclusion

This analysis has questioned prevailing narratives that depict neo-patrimonialism as a pathological departure from normal democratic standards. Rather, through the empirical evidence from Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania, the paper has shown that neo-patrimonialism provides a rational and adaptive strategy of governance in East Africa—smattered with historical vestiges, elite bargains, and informal power networks. Whether it be through ethnic-based patronage in Kenya, militarized authoritarianism in Uganda, or bureaucratic clientelism in Tanzania, the neopatrimonial continues to define how authority is legitimated, resources are distributed, and political stability is imposed. It is not an exception, but rather a logic of statehood alongside, and frequently undermining, formal institutional arrangements. Data from V-Dem, Afrobarometer and APRM all confirm this observation that, despite formal reforms, informal politics is key and institutions of democracy often mainly to legitimize elite rule rather than to facilitate democracy authority.

These findings have two implications. First, they invite a more nuanced and sceptical reflection on theorisation and practice of democratic consolidation and developmental governance in Africa. Institutional changes will not themselves dislodge neopatrimonial logics unless they confront the informal political logics that shape the behavior of elites. Second, this analysis underscores the case that we need to recast policy interventions—both by donors and by domestic reformers—so that the focus is on technocratic constructs rather than on a strategy of structural transformation. As the record indicates, neopatrimonialism is not just robust and on the move. To reimagine African statehood, therefore, we have to move beyond the moralist reformism of anti-corruption and good governance talk and towards the political economy of historical depth, relational power and the continuing intertwining of formality with informality.

5.2 Recommendations

The reforms to reconfigure will have to look beyond institutional formalization and target the informal networks (ethnic (trade) patronage, the armed/other forces, and bureaucratic or administrative clientelism) that buttress neopatrimonial regimes. Interventions should address the tearing down of these networks using transparency mechanisms that reveal elite capture: digitisation of procurement systems, intensify the ongoing independent audits at national and sub-national levels, and civic monitoring platforms where citizens can follow the flow of public resources. Political skill is thus required, as well as an understanding of context, accepting that informal institutions are often more critical than formal ones in deciding who rules and in what way.

The strengthening of interconnections between horizontal accountability institutions like parliaments, courts and anti-corruption agencies on the one hand and vertical accountability systems such as citizen oversight, freedom of the media and civil society on the other should be a focus of efforts to improve institutional accountability. This involves shielding the autonomy and operational space of watchdog bodies from executive capture, as well establishing legal and institutional shield to protect whistleblowers and investigative journalists. Corruption and clientelism should not be understood as technical problems that are purely a matter of instituting best practice: instead, reforms should position these as part of longer-term political processes, public pushes, and systemic uncovering.

Donor frameworks premised on linear models of democratization need to rethink the political usefulness of neopatrimonialism. Instead of enforcing depersonalized institutions regardless of the organization or legitimation of particular locality, allies should be promoting the endogenous reforms that work on hybrid arrangements (like community accountability fora or traditional authority) that can help to supplement control by state. Conditionalities need to be rethought so that they reward more than rule-of-law compliance-discernible changes in elite behavior, resource allocation, and citizen access.

In formal terms, we would argue that scholars and policymakers need to de-idealise the issue of state failure and take the notion of neopatrimonialism as a rational form of governance with a certain historicity, pragmatics of survival and a logic of adaptive institutionalism. More generally, future research would do well to combine such fine-grained empirical data—whether drawn from the V-Dem system, the Afrobarometer, or the accounts of Auditor Generals—with qualitative fieldwork sensitive to the related dimensions of power.

Comparative studies that follow how neo-patrimonial practices transform in the face of electoral pressure, donor conditionality, or economic change will be particularly key in refining our understanding of statehood in East Africa and other contexts.

Declaration of Conflict of Interest

The researcher declares no conflict of interest



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