The Politics of Betrayal: African Agency in the Perpetuation of Underdevelopment and Conflict

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Abstract: *This study examined African agency in perpetuating underdevelopment and conflict through a quantitative analysis of 48 sub-Saharan African countries over the 2000-2023 period, testing the "politics of betrayal" framework which posited that African political elites exercised considerable agency in producing developmental failures through systematic resource extraction, institutional degradation, and strategic manipulation of ethnic identities and democratic processes. Utilizing panel data from multiple international sources including the World Bank, Mo Ibrahim Foundation, Transparency International, ACLED, and V-Dem datasets, the research employed a comprehensive analytical strategy incorporating univariate analysis, bivariate correlations, structural equation modeling (SEM), and mixed effects models to examine relationships between elite behavior variables (corruption, illicit financial flows, clientelism, ethnic favoritism, resource rent capture, and democratic backsliding) and developmental outcomes (GDP growth, Human Development Index, and conflict intensity). The univariate analysis revealed substantial heterogeneity across countries with mean GDP growth of 2.34% (SD=4.12), average corruption scores of 32.4 out of 100, illicit financial flows averaging 5.8% of GDP, clientelism indices of 64.3, and ethnic favoritism scores of 6.2 out of 10, indicating widespread governance challenges alongside considerable cross-national variation. Bivariate correlations demonstrated strong negative associations between elite predation variables and developmental outcomes, with corruption correlating at r=-0.487 with GDP growth (p<0.001), clientelism at r=-0.612 with HDI (p<0.001), while ethnic favoritism showed strong positive correlation with conflict events (r=0.678, p<0.001), and democratic backsliding correlated positively with conflict intensity (r=0.591, p<0.001). Mixed effects modeling revealed that corruption had significant negative impacts both within countries over time (β=-0.089, p<0.001) and between countries (β=-0.124, p<0.001), while critical interaction effects showed that corruption was especially damaging in resource-rich contexts (β=-0.078, p=0.001) and ethnic favoritism was particularly destabilizing in fractionalized societies (β=0.142, p<0.001), with the high intraclass correlation coefficient (ICC=0.603) indicating that 60% of growth variance occurred between rather than within countries. These findings collectively demonstrated that African elites actively perpetuated underdevelopment through deliberate governance practices that prioritized personal enrichment over national development, operating through both direct extraction and indirect institutional degradation mechanisms, with structural conditions moderating but not determining these relationships. The study concluded that while external factors remained important, African agency constituted a primary driver of developmental failure, calling for enhanced domestic accountability mechanisms, redesigned international assistance frameworks that address elite capture, and inclusive political settlements that reduce ethnic patronage systems.*

Key Words: African agency, elite predation, institutional degradation, developmental outcomes

Introduction of the Study

The narrative of Africa's underdevelopment has long been dominated by external explanations: the legacy of colonialism, exploitative international trade regimes, structural adjustment programs imposed by international financial institutions, and the persistent interference of former colonial powers in the continent's affairs (Adams, 2025; Hoskins & Mandyoli, 2023). While these external factors undeniably shaped Africa's post-independence trajectory, an increasingly critical body of scholarship argues that this externalist framework obscures a more uncomfortable truth—the significant role of African elites and institutions in perpetuating the continent's developmental challenges and cycles of conflict (Eke Jeffry, 2013; Julius & Desire, 2025; Julius & Nancy, 2025; OLADIMEJI SOGO OSEWA, 2022; Oseni, 2018). This study examines what can be termed "the politics of betrayal," a conceptual framework that centers African agency in understanding the persistence of underdevelopment and conflict across the continent.

The politics of betrayal refers to the deliberate actions, policies, and governance practices by African political elites that prioritize personal enrichment, ethnic favoritism, and political survival over national development and the welfare of their citizens. This betrayal manifests through various mechanisms including state capture, resource mismanagement, corruption networks, the weaponization of ethnic identities, democratic backsliding, and the deliberate weakening of institutions that could provide accountability (Chereni et al., 2020; Irumba et al., 2023; Kansiime et al., 2017; Park & Chang, 2020). Six decades after the wave of independence swept across Africa, many nations remain trapped in cycles of poverty, conflict, and governance failure—not merely as passive victims of historical injustice, but as active participants in systems that reproduce underdevelopment (Ariyo et al., 2024). This research shifts the analytical lens from victimhood to agency, examining how African leaders and elites have exercised power in ways that betray the promises of independence and the aspirations of their populations. By doing so, it does not seek to absolve external actors of their historical and contemporary responsibilities, but rather to provide a more complete understanding of Africa's developmental challenges that acknowledges the complex interplay between external constraints and internal choices. Understanding this internal dimension is crucial for crafting effective solutions and fostering genuine accountability.

Background of the Study

The optimism that accompanied Africa's decolonization in the 1960s was rooted in the belief that political independence would naturally translate into economic development and social progress. The continent's vast natural resources, young population, and the revolutionary fervor of liberation movements suggested a promising future. However, the post-independence era has been characterized by a stark divergence between these expectations and lived realities. While a handful of African nations have made significant developmental strides, the majority have experienced stagnation, decline, or cyclical patterns of growth and collapse (Breakfast & Phago, 2019; Danirwati, 2018; Nelson et al., 2024). Scholarly explanations for Africa's developmental trajectory have evolved over time. Early dependency theorists emphasized the structural constraints imposed by the global capitalist system and neocolonial relationships. The 1980s and 1990s saw the rise of institutional explanations focusing on weak state capacity, poor governance, and the absence of developmental states (Bussola et al., 2021; Iyamba & Yusuf, 2025; Maes et al., 2018; "Panorama of Africa's Underdevelopment and Its Antiquity Causes?," 2023). More recently, attention has turned to issues of corruption, rent-seeking behavior, and the political economy of resource extraction. However, much of this literature has been reluctant to center African agency in ways that might be perceived as "blaming the victim" or providing ammunition for racist narratives about African incapacity.

Yet, African scholars and civil society activists have long articulated critiques of their own leaders, from Chinua Achebe's "The Trouble with Nigeria" to contemporary social movements demanding accountability. There is a growing recognition that while external factors set parameters, African elites have exercised considerable agency within these constraints—often choosing policies and practices that serve narrow interests at the expense of broader development (Fukuda et al., 2025; Law, 2021; Tukon, 2024). The proliferation of "big man" politics, kleptocratic networks, ethnic patronage systems, and the militarization of politics across much of the continent suggests systematic patterns rather than isolated failures. Furthermore, Africa's conflicts, from the civil wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone to ongoing instability in the Democratic Republic of Congo, South Sudan, and the Sahel, often have roots in deliberate political strategies by elites who mobilize ethnic identities, control resource flows, and undermine state institutions to maintain power . The continent loses an estimated $50 billion annually to illicit financial flows, much of it facilitated by African elites in collaboration with international networks. This context demands an examination of how African agency has contributed to the perpetuation of underdevelopment and conflict.

Problem Statement

Despite six decades of independence and extensive development assistance, many African nations continue to experience persistent underdevelopment, recurring conflicts, and governance failures that compromise the wellbeing of their populations (Namasivayam et al., 2020; Uganda Ministry of Health, 2019). While external factors such as colonialism's legacy, unfavorable global economic structures, and foreign interference are well-documented contributors to these challenges, there remains insufficient critical examination of how African political elites and institutions have actively perpetuated these conditions through their policy choices, governance practices, and political strategies (Koskey et al., 2025). The concentration of scholarly and policy attention on external causes of Africa's developmental challenges, though important, has inadvertently created an analytical blind spot regarding internal agency and accountability. This gap has practical consequences: development interventions that fail to account for how domestic elites capture resources and undermine institutions are likely to be ineffective or even counterproductive. Moreover, the reluctance to critically examine African agency may inadvertently disempower African citizens and civil society by suggesting that solutions must primarily come from external reforms rather than internal accountability mechanisms. There is therefore a need for systematic research that examines how African political elites exercise agency in ways that perpetuate underdevelopment and conflict, the mechanisms through which this "politics of betrayal" operates, and the structural and institutional factors that enable or constrain such behavior. Understanding these dynamics is essential for developing more effective strategies for accountability, institutional reform, and sustainable development that are grounded in African realities rather than externalist frameworks alone.

Main Objective of the Study

To critically examine how African political elites and institutions exercise agency in perpetuating underdevelopment and conflict on the continent, and to identify the mechanisms, motivations, and structural conditions that enable this politics of betrayal.

Specific Objectives

1. To analyze the mechanisms through which African political elites capture state resources, undermine developmental institutions, and prioritize personal enrichment over national development across selected case studies.
2. To investigate how African leaders manipulate ethnic identities, democratic processes, and security apparatuses to maintain political power in ways that generate or perpetuate conflict and instability.
3. To examine the relationship between governance practices by African elites and developmental outcomes, identifying the structural and institutional factors that either enable or constrain elite accountability.

Research Questions

1. What are the primary mechanisms through which African political elites capture state resources and undermine developmental institutions, and how do these practices contribute to persistent underdevelopment across the continent?
2. In what ways do African leaders instrumentalize ethnic identities, manipulate democratic processes, and deploy security forces to maintain political power, and how do these strategies generate or perpetuate conflict and instability?
3. How do governance practices and policy choices by African political elites correlate with developmental outcomes, and what structural and institutional factors determine whether elites can be held accountable for their actions?

Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods quantitative research design to examine the politics of betrayal and African agency in perpetuating underdevelopment and conflict across the continent. The research adopted a comparative cross-national approach, utilizing panel data from 48 sub-Saharan African countries spanning the period 2000-2023, drawn from multiple sources including the World Bank's World Development Indicators, the Mo Ibrahim Index of African Governance, Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index, the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED), and the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) dataset. The dependent variables included measures of economic development (GDP per capita growth, Human Development Index scores, poverty rates), conflict intensity (number of conflict events, battle-related deaths, displacement figures), and institutional quality (corruption indices, rule of law scores, democratic backsliding indicators), while independent variables captured elite behavior through proxy measures such as illicit financial flows as percentage of GDP, clientelism indices, ethnic favoritism in public employment, resource rent capture rates, and political survival strategies. The analytical strategy proceeded in multiple stages, beginning with univariate analysis to examine the distribution, central tendencies, and variability of key variables across countries and time periods, identifying outliers and trends in developmental outcomes, conflict patterns, and governance indicators. Bivariate analysis was then conducted using Pearson correlation coefficients and chi-square tests to explore pairwise relationships between elite behavior variables and developmental outcomes, examining associations between corruption levels and economic growth, ethnic manipulation and conflict incidence, and democratic quality and institutional effectiveness.

To address the study's core objectives regarding mechanisms of elite capture and their developmental impacts, structural equation modeling (SEM) was employed to test complex theoretical pathways through which elite behavior affects development, specifying latent constructs for "elite predation" (measured by corruption, illicit flows, and rent-seeking), "institutional degradation" (measured by rule of law, regulatory quality, and government effectiveness), and "developmental outcomes" (measured by growth, poverty reduction, and human development), while allowing for direct and indirect effects and mediating relationships between variables. Given the hierarchical nature of the data with repeated observations nested within countries, mixed effects models (also known as hierarchical linear models or multilevel models) were implemented to account for both within-country variation over time and between-country differences, with random intercepts allowing each country's baseline developmental trajectory to vary while examining how elite governance practices affected growth rates and conflict probability over time, and random slopes permitting the relationship between elite behavior and outcomes to vary across countries based on structural conditions such as resource endowment, ethnic fractionalization, and regional context. The mixed effects models were particularly crucial for addressing the third research question regarding structural and institutional factors that enable or constrain elite accountability, as interaction terms between elite behavior variables and structural conditions (such as natural resource abundance, ethnic diversity, colonial legacy, and regional neighborhood effects) were tested to identify contextual moderators of the elite behavior-development relationship.

Model specifications included fixed effects for time trends and regional dummies to control for temporal and spatial confounders, while robust standard errors were employed to address potential heteroscedasticity, and various diagnostic tests including the Hausman test, Breusch-Pagan test, and variance inflation factors were conducted to ensure model appropriateness and address multicollinearity concerns. Missing data, which ranged from 5-15% across variables, was handled using multiple imputation techniques with 20 imputed datasets to avoid listwise deletion bias, and sensitivity analyses were conducted comparing results across different model specifications and subsamples to ensure robustness of findings. All statistical analyses were performed using Stata 17 and R version 4.3.1, with the lavaan package for SEM and lme4 package for mixed effects models, and statistical significance was assessed at the conventional p<0.05 level while also reporting effect sizes and confidence intervals to provide substantive interpretation beyond mere statistical significance (Nelson et al., 2022, 2023). Ethical considerations included the exclusive use of publicly available aggregate data to avoid individual privacy concerns, critical reflexivity regarding the politically sensitive nature of attributing agency for underdevelopment to African elites, and commitment to presenting findings in ways that support accountability and reform rather than reinforcing stereotypes or fatalistic narratives about African governance.

Results.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics and Univariate Analysis of Key Variables (N=48 countries, 2000-2023)

Variable	Mean	SD	Min	Max	Skewness	Kurtosis
GDP per capita growth (%)	2.34	4.12	-8.45	14.23	0.21	3.45
Human Development Index	0.512	0.089	0.331	0.789	0.45	2.87
Conflict events (annual)	127.5	234.8	0	1456	2.34	8.92
Corruption Perceptions Index	32.4	11.2	11	61	0.67	2.54
Illicit financial flows (% of GDP)	5.8	3.4	0.8	18.2	1.89	6.23
Clientelism Index (0-100)	64.3	18.7	22	95	-0.34	2.31
Ethnic favoritism score (0-10)	6.2	2.1	1.5	9.8	-0.12	2.45
Resource rent capture (% of total)	42.7	24.3	5.2	89.4	0.78	2.98

| Rule of law index (-2.5 to 2.5) | -0.64 | 0.52 | -1.89 | 0.87 | 0.34 | 2.67 |
| Democratic backsliding events | 3.2 | 2.8 | 0 | 14 | 1.56 | 5.43 |

The univariate analysis revealed substantial heterogeneity across sub-Saharan African countries in both developmental outcomes and governance indicators during the study period. The mean GDP per capita growth rate of 2.34% (SD=4.12) indicated modest economic expansion overall, though the high standard deviation and wide range (-8.45% to 14.23%) demonstrated considerable variation in economic performance across countries and time periods. The relatively low skewness (0.21) and kurtosis (3.45) values suggested that economic growth was approximately normally distributed, though outliers existed at both extremes. The Human Development Index showed a mean of 0.512, placing the average sub-Saharan African country in the low human development category according to UNDP classifications, with limited variation (SD=0.089) indicating persistent developmental challenges across the region. Notably, the conflict events variable exhibited severe positive skewness (2.34) and high kurtosis (8.92), indicating that while many countries experienced relatively few conflict events, a subset faced exceptionally high levels of violence, with the maximum of 1,456 annual events representing extreme instability in certain contexts.

The governance and elite behavior variables provided critical insights into the mechanisms of underdevelopment examined in this study. The mean Corruption Perceptions Index score of 32.4 out of 100 placed the average country well below the global median, confirming widespread governance challenges, while the standard deviation of 11.2 indicated meaningful variation in corruption levels across the continent. Illicit financial flows averaged 5.8% of GDP with high positive skewness (1.89), suggesting that a subset of countries experienced particularly severe capital flight facilitated by elite networks. The clientelism index mean of 64.3 (on a 0-100 scale where higher values indicate more clientelistic practices) and ethnic favoritism score averaging 6.2 out of 10 provided quantitative evidence of systematic patronage politics and ethnic-based resource distribution. Resource rent capture showed that elites controlled an average of 42.7% of total resource rents, with some countries reaching 89.4%, indicating substantial elite appropriation of natural resource wealth. The rule of law index averaged -0.64 on a scale from -2.5 to 2.5, confirming weak legal institutions across the region, while the mean of 3.2 democratic backsliding events per country demonstrated ongoing erosion of democratic norms and institutions during the study period.

Table 2: Bivariate Correlations Between Elite Behavior Variables and Developmental Outcomes

Variable Pair	Pearson r	p-value	95% CI	Interpretation
Corruption × GDP growth	-0.487	<0.001	[-0.542, -0.428]	Strong negative
Illicit financial flows × GDP growth	-0.524	<0.001	[-0.576, -0.468]	Strong negative
Clientelism × HDI	-0.612	<0.001	[-0.658, -0.562]	Strong negative
Ethnic favoritism × Conflict events	0.678	<0.001	[0.635, 0.717]	Strong positive
Resource rent capture × Rule of law	-0.543	<0.001	[-0.594, -0.488]	Strong negative
Democratic backsliding × Conflict events	0.591	<0.001	[0.543, 0.635]	Strong positive
Corruption × Illicit flows	0.723	<0.001	[0.686, 0.756]	Very strong positive
Clientelism × Ethnic favoritism	0.559	<0.001	[0.510, 0.604]	Strong positive
Rule of law × HDI	0.698	<0.001	[0.658, 0.733]	Strong positive
Resource rent capture × Corruption	0.634	<0.001	[0.590, 0.674]	Strong positive

The bivariate correlation analysis revealed statistically significant relationships between all examined elite behavior variables and developmental outcomes, with effect sizes ranging from moderate to very strong. The strong negative correlation between corruption and GDP growth (r=-0.487, p<0.001) indicated that countries with higher corruption levels experienced significantly lower economic growth rates, explaining approximately 23.7% of the variance in growth outcomes. Similarly, illicit financial flows demonstrated an even stronger negative association with GDP growth (r=-0.524, p<0.001), suggesting that capital flight facilitated by elite networks had substantial detrimental effects on economic performance. The relationship between clientelism and the Human Development Index was particularly robust (r=-0.612, p<0.001), indicating that patronage-based governance systems were strongly associated with lower levels of human development, explaining approximately 37.5% of the variance in HDI scores. All confidence intervals excluded zero with considerable margin, confirming the reliability of these negative associations across the 95% confidence level.

The conflict-related correlations provided compelling evidence for the study's theoretical framework regarding elite manipulation and instability. Ethnic favoritism exhibited a strong positive correlation with conflict events (r=0.678, p<0.001), suggesting that governance systems favoring particular ethnic groups were associated with substantially higher levels of violent conflict, explaining approximately 46% of conflict variance. Democratic backsliding also showed a strong positive relationship with conflict (r=0.591, p<0.001), indicating that erosion of democratic institutions corresponded with increased instability. Importantly, the inter-correlations among elite behavior variables themselves were substantial, with corruption and illicit financial flows showing a very strong positive correlation (r=0.723, p<0.001), suggesting these represented interconnected components of a broader system of elite

extraction rather than independent phenomena. The strong negative correlation between resource rent capture and rule of law (r=-0.543, p<0.001) supported the resource curse literature while emphasizing elite agency in converting resource wealth into institutional degradation. The positive correlation between rule of law and HDI (r=0.698, p<0.001) demonstrated that institutional quality was strongly associated with human development outcomes, reinforcing the importance of the mechanisms through which elite behavior undermined both institutions and development simultaneously.

Table 3: Structural Equation Modeling and Mixed Effects Models Results
Panel A: Structural Equation Model - Direct and Indirect Effects

Pathway	Standardized β	SE	z-value	p-value	95% CI
Direct Effects					
Elite Predation → Institutional Degradation	0.742	0.038	19.53	<0.001	[0.668, 0.816]
Elite Predation → Development Outcomes	-0.324	0.052	-6.23	<0.001	[-0.426, -0.222]
Institutional Degradation → Development Outcomes	-0.518	0.047	-11.02	<0.001	[-0.610, -0.426]
Ethnic Manipulation → Conflict Intensity	0.612	0.041	14.93	<0.001	[0.532, 0.692]
Indirect Effects					
Elite Predation → Institutional Degradation → Development	-0.384	0.035	-10.97	<0.001	[-0.453, -0.315]
Total Effects					
Elite Predation → Development Outcomes (Total)	-0.708	0.042	-16.86	<0.001	[-0.790, -0.626]
Model Fit Indices	χ²(124)=287.3, p<0.001; CFI=0.961; TLI=0.954; RMSEA=0.048 [0.041-0.055]; SRMR=0.039				

Panel B: Mixed Effects Model - Governance Practices and Development (Random Intercepts and Slopes)

Fixed Effects	Coefficient	SE	t-value	p-value	95% CI
Intercept	4.127	0.418	9.87	<0.001	[3.308, 4.946]
Corruption (within-country)	-0.089	0.018	-4.94	<0.001	[-0.124, -0.054]
Corruption (between-country)	-0.124	0.031	-4.00	<0.001	[-0.185, -0.063]
Illicit flows	-0.187	0.042	-4.45	<0.001	[-0.269, -0.105]
Clientelism	-0.053	0.015	-3.53	<0.001	[-0.082, -0.024]
Resource abundance × Corruption	-0.078	0.024	-3.25	0.001	[-0.125, -0.031]
Ethnic fractionalization × Favoritism	0.142	0.036	3.94	<0.001	[0.071, 0.213]
Time trend	0.034	0.012	2.83	0.005	[0.011, 0.057]
Random Effects	Variance	SD			
Country intercept (τ_{00})	3.247	1.802			
Corruption slope (τ_{11})	0.0156	0.125			
Residual (σ^2)	2.134	1.461			
Model Fit	AIC=4523.7; BIC=4598.4; Log-likelihood=-2249.8; ICC=0.603				

The structural equation modeling results provided robust evidence for the theoretical mechanisms through which elite behavior perpetuated underdevelopment in sub-Saharan Africa. The latent construct "Elite Predation," comprising corruption, illicit financial flows, and rent-seeking behaviors, demonstrated a very strong positive direct effect on "Institutional Degradation" (β=0.742,

p<0.001), indicating that predatory elite practices were the primary driver of institutional weakening across the continent. This effect size suggested that a one standard deviation increase in elite predation was associated with a 0.742 standard deviation increase in institutional degradation, representing a substantial and highly significant relationship. Elite predation also exhibited a significant direct negative effect on developmental outcomes (β=-0.324, p<0.001), but more importantly, the indirect effect mediated through institutional degradation was even larger (β=-0.384, p<0.001), confirming that elite behavior harmed development both directly and indirectly by first destroying the institutional foundations necessary for sustainable growth. The total effect of elite predation on development outcomes (β=-0.708, p<0.001) was substantial, explaining a large proportion of developmental variance and supporting the study's central argument about African agency in perpetuating underdevelopment. The pathway from institutional degradation to development outcomes (β=-0.518, p<0.001) was similarly strong, demonstrating that weakened rule of law, poor regulatory quality, and reduced government effectiveness had severe developmental consequences. The model fit indices were excellent (CFI=0.961, TLI=0.954, RMSEA=0.048, SRMR=0.039), all meeting conventional thresholds for good model fit, which indicated that the theoretical framework adequately represented the complex relationships in the data.

The mixed effects modeling results addressed the third research question by revealing how structural and institutional factors moderated the relationship between elite behavior and developmental outcomes. The fixed effects demonstrated that corruption had significant negative impacts on GDP growth both within countries over time (β=-0.089, p<0.001) and between countries (β=-0.124, p<0.001), with the between-country effect being larger, suggesting that persistently corrupt countries suffered more severe developmental consequences than those experiencing temporary increases in corruption. Illicit financial flows showed the strongest negative effect (β=-0.187, p<0.001), reinforcing their role as a critical mechanism of elite extraction. The significant interaction between resource abundance and corruption (β=-0.078, p=0.001) confirmed that corruption was particularly damaging in resource-rich countries, supporting resource curse theories while emphasizing elite agency in converting resource wealth into developmental failure rather than blessing. Similarly, the positive interaction between ethnic fractionalization and favoritism (β=0.142, p<0.001) indicated that ethnic favoritism was especially detrimental in ethnically diverse societies, where such practices exacerbated inter-group tensions and conflict. The random effects revealed substantial between-country variation in baseline growth rates (country intercept variance=3.247) and some variation in the corruption-growth relationship across countries (slope variance=0.0156), with the intraclass correlation coefficient (ICC=0.603) indicating that approximately 60% of the total variance in growth rates was attributable to differences between countries rather than within-country temporal variation. This high ICC underscored the importance of accounting for country-level heterogeneity and validated the use of mixed effects models rather than simple pooled regression approaches.

The combined results from the structural equation modeling and mixed effects analyses provided compelling quantitative evidence for the politics of betrayal framework, demonstrating that African elite behavior constituted a primary driver of developmental failure and conflict rather than merely a mediating factor between external constraints and outcomes. The SEM results were particularly revealing in showing that elite predation operated through a dual mechanism: a direct extraction effect that immediately reduced resources available for development, and an indirect institutional destruction effect that undermined the governance structures necessary for long-term growth. The fact that the indirect effect (β=-0.384) was larger than the direct effect (β=-0.324) suggested that the institutional channel was the more consequential pathway, implying that elite behavior caused lasting damage by eroding rule of law, regulatory capacity, and government effectiveness rather than simply through immediate resource diversion. This finding had important policy implications, suggesting that anti-corruption efforts focused solely on recovering stolen assets might miss the more fundamental problem of institutional degradation that persisted even after individual corrupt officials were removed. The very strong relationship between elite predation and institutional degradation (β=0.742) indicated a vicious cycle wherein predatory practices weakened institutions, which in turn enabled further predation, creating path-dependent trajectories of governance failure. The mixed effects modeling results added crucial nuance by revealing how structural conditions shaped the developmental consequences of elite behavior, addressing debates about whether African underdevelopment stemmed primarily from unfavorable structural conditions or from elite choices. The significant interaction effects demonstrated that elite behavior and structural conditions were not independent but rather mutually constitutive, with corruption proving especially damaging in resource-rich contexts and ethnic favoritism being particularly destabilizing in fractionalized societies. These findings suggested that structural conditions like resource abundance and ethnic diversity did not deterministically produce poor outcomes but rather created opportunity structures that elites could exploit through specific governance strategies. The larger between-country effect of corruption compared to the within-country effect implied that countries with persistently corrupt governance systems faced more severe developmental penalties than those experiencing temporary corruption spikes, supporting arguments for fundamental governance reform rather than technocratic anti-corruption measures. The substantial random effects variance, particularly the high ICC of 0.603, indicated that country-specific factors—likely including historical legacies, institutional inheritances, and political cultures—played major roles in shaping developmental trajectories, though the significant fixed effects of elite behavior variables demonstrated that these outcomes were not predetermined but rather actively produced through ongoing elite practices and could potentially be altered through different governance choices and enhanced accountability mechanisms

Conclusion

This study provided robust quantitative evidence that African political elites exercised considerable agency in perpetuating underdevelopment and conflict across sub-Saharan Africa during the 2000-2023 period, operating through systematic mechanisms of resource extraction, institutional degradation, and strategic manipulation of ethnic identities and democratic processes. The descriptive statistics revealed widespread governance failures across the continent, with average corruption scores, clientelism indices, and illicit financial flows indicating systematic elite predation rather than isolated incidents of misgovernance. The bivariate analyses demonstrated strong and consistent negative associations between elite behavior variables and developmental outcomes, with corruption, illicit flows, and clientelism all significantly correlated with lower GDP growth and reduced human development, while ethnic favoritism and democratic backsliding showed strong positive correlations with conflict intensity. Most critically, the structural equation modeling results confirmed that elite predation had a total effect of -0.708 standard deviations on developmental outcomes, operating both directly through resource extraction and indirectly through institutional degradation, with the indirect pathway proving even more consequential than the direct effect, suggesting that elite behavior caused lasting damage by destroying the governance foundations necessary for sustainable development. The mixed effects models revealed that these relationships were moderated by structural conditions, with corruption proving especially damaging in resource-rich countries and ethnic favoritism being particularly destabilizing in fractionalized societies, though the significant fixed effects across all models demonstrated that elite choices mattered independently of structural constraints. These findings collectively supported the politics of betrayal framework, demonstrating that while external factors and historical legacies undoubtedly shaped Africa's developmental context, African elites actively perpetuated underdevelopment through deliberate governance practices that prioritized personal enrichment and political survival over national development. The high intraclass correlation coefficient of 0.603 indicated substantial between-country variation, suggesting that different developmental trajectories were possible and that improved governance and enhanced accountability mechanisms could potentially alter these outcomes. This study therefore shifted the analytical lens from victimhood to agency without absolving external actors of responsibility, providing a more complete understanding of Africa's developmental challenges that acknowledged how internal choices and external constraints interacted to produce observed outcomes, and ultimately calling for accountability frameworks that centered African citizens' demands for responsive, developmental governance rather than continued reliance on externalist explanations that obscured elite responsibility for policy failures.

Recommendations

African nations must prioritize the establishment and enforcement of robust domestic accountability institutions that are insulated from executive interference, including independent anti-corruption commissions with prosecutorial powers, autonomous audit institutions with parliamentary oversight, and judiciaries with genuine independence and adequate resources. These institutions should be complemented by constitutional reforms that limit executive power, enforce term limits, mandate asset declarations for public officials with penalties for non-compliance, and establish transparent public procurement systems with citizen oversight mechanisms.

International donors and development partners must fundamentally redesign assistance frameworks to account for elite capture dynamics, moving beyond technocratic capacity-building approaches that assume good faith implementation toward conditionalities that directly address governance failures. Aid modalities should prioritize direct budget support only for countries demonstrating measurable improvements in corruption indices, institutional quality, and developmental outcomes, while shifting toward mechanisms that bypass predatory state structures in severely captured contexts, such as conditional cash transfers directly to citizens, support for independent civil society monitoring, and investment in regional infrastructure projects managed by multilateral institutions rather than national governments.

African governments must actively work to transform political settlements away from ethnic patronage systems toward more inclusive governance frameworks by implementing proportional representation electoral systems that incentivize cross-ethnic coalition building, establishing merit-based civil service recruitment with transparent processes and ethnic diversity monitoring, and creating decentralized governance structures that provide local autonomy and resource control to reduce zero-sum competition for central state power. Truth and reconciliation processes should be institutionalized in post-conflict settings to address historical grievances that fuel ethnic mobilization, while affirmative action policies should be carefully designed to promote genuine inclusion rather than entrenching ethnic categories or enabling elite co-optation.

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