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IMPACT OF EXTERNAL POWERS ON LAND GOVERNANCE IN AFRICA: CRITICAL JUNCTURES AND THE SEARCH FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE

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Abstract. Land governance in much of Africa remains rooted in inherited colonial structures, and African governments have yet to develop a pathway toward social justice amidst ongoing global neoliberal influences. The paper sought to identify and critically analyse how historical and ongoing critical junctures have created opportunities for land reclamation and social justice in Africa. Specific critical junctures analysed in the paper include the Cold War era, structural adjustment programmes (SAPs), land grabbing under globalisation, the establishment of foreign military bases in Africa, the transition to multiparty democracy, post-conflict reconstruction periods, the establishment of Pan-African institutions and frameworks, and digital land governance reforms. The paper employs an integrative review approach to examine these critical junctures and the opportunities they have provided to African governments over time. Findings from the identified critical junctures show that geopolitical dynamics, combined with local elitism and entrenched cultures of patronage politics, influence ownership, access, and control over land in Africa. The paper observes that Western hegemonic forces still retain significant influence over the direction of land governance, which explains why most of the critical junctures that presented opportunities for transforming the legacies of skewed post-independence land ownership patterns were not fully utilised or partially utilised.

Keywords: critical junctures; historical injustices; land governance; reforms; social justice; Africa

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1. Introduction

Postcolonial land governance in Africa still bears the marks of unresolved colonial legacies, including inequitable land ownership patterns, bimodal agrarian structures, legal pluralism, economic inequality, and entrenched racial and class hierarchies (Austin, 2010). These legacies reflect the failure of post-independence governments to implement transformative reforms. Attempts at land reform have yielded mixed results, generally demonstrating a lack of genuine social transformation due to ongoing insecurities in land rights, unequal benefit distribution, continued marginalisation of vulnerable social groups, and even patterns of ethno-regionalism (Mkodzongi & Lawrence, 2019). A considerable body of literature has investigated various aspects of land governance, such as land tenure systems in Africa, customary and statutory regimes, land rights and tenure security, and neoliberal land reforms (Wegerif et al., 2025). However, there has not been much attention towards analysing how African governments have consistently missed critical junctures to address colonial legacies of land injustices. What has

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not been comprehensively investigated is how critical junctures—defined as moments when the likelihood of change is highly probable—have presented windows of opportunity for transforming land ownership.

Studies on critical junctures in Africa are commonly found in political science, covering areas such as democracy, urban planning and governance, women's rights, and civil wars (García-Ponce & Wantchekon, 2023; Paulson-Smith & Tripp, 2021). The few studies focusing on critical junctures in African land governance primarily examine a single critical juncture, such as the digitalisation of land governance, institutional development, and institutional change in land governance (Home, 2021). Others that analyse the dynamics of land governance reforms (see Klopp & Lumumba, 2017) do not apply the critical junctures perspective and thus overlook nuances related to windows for potential structural change opened by watershed events and processes at regional and national levels. Additional works explore the challenges and politics involved in reforming land policy within multi-level governance contexts (Klopp & Lumumba, 2017). The primary focus of those is on intergovernmental relations and their implications for changes in land governance. The work of Salman & Mori (2023) reviews the conditions, timing, and processes of land governance change; however, it functions merely as a generic template for understanding land governance changes and does not analyse specific historical events with transformative potential in land ownership.

The paper argues that over time, African governments not only missed critical moments for transformative land reform but also allowed geopolitical imperial pressures to reinforce exclusionary land ownership systems on the continent. The paper further argues that if past flat-footedness and reluctance persist, African governments will likely miss critical junctures, such as the rise of Pan-African land institutions and digital land governance reforms, which present new opportunities for pursuing equitable land governance. The paper contributes to historical institutionalism in African land studies by synthesising missed historical critical junctures, governmental inaction, and geopolitical dynamics in the persistent land injustices in Africa. The paper sought to answer the following research questions:

- What critical historical junctures presented windows of opportunity for African governments to address land inequalities?
- What are the possible reasons behind the missing or underutilisation of critical junctures for reforming land ownership structures?

2. The concept of critical junctures

By definition, a critical juncture is understood as "a moment in which change is of heightened probability" (Volpi & Gerschewski, 2020:1032). It reflects a key but rare moment that is characterised by endogenous or exogenous shocks, where institutions, practices, norms, and structures can potentially undergo radical transformation. This is made possible by the loosening of structural constraints, which may have had a disempowering effect on actors, making it favourable to create new institutions (Munck, 2021). The intellectual foundation of 'critical junctures' goes back to the work of Lipset and Rokkan (1967), who first applied the idea of critical junctures in the context of Western European party systems, which, as the authors argued, were shaped by 'three crucial junctures' in the history of each country. Critical junctures are rooted in the traditions of historical institutionalism (Hogan, 2019), where the focus of analysis is on how formal rules, informal norms, and organisational structures influence or shape the patterns of change over time (Sorensen, 2023).

Following Mahoney (2000), before changes occur in a critical juncture, two critical conditions must be met. First, what he called 'antecedent conditions', that is, the pre-existing historical conditions (social, economic, cultural, etc) that will influence the choices or plausible options that will be followed by actors during the critical juncture; for example, Africa's historical legacies of inequitable racial land ownership, tenure insecurity, and land protests. Second, what are called 'permissive conditions', that is, the factors that permit the occurrence of significant changes in policies, structures, practices, and norms (Sorensen, 2023). It is, therefore, the antecedent and

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permissive conditions that provide the basis for critical junctures (Mahoney, 2000). Notably, when critical junctures come, and relevant actors fail to seize them, they come across as 'moments of missed opportunities' for creating and shaping long-term trajectories (path dependencies) of social justice (Capoccia, 2015). Decisions and options chosen during a critical juncture birth new, path-dependent institutions that shape future development. Once installed, these may not be easily changed.

Over time, critical junctures emerge from exogenous or endogenous disruptions and shocks, such as economic crises, wars, or political upheavals, creating windows of opportunity for making transformative decisions (Capoccia, 2015). Historically, African countries have experienced shared and sometimes distinct phases of economic crises, such as those that led to the adoption of Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) in the 1990s. SAPs became a significant opportunity for extensive economic restructuring in African countries (Mkandawire & Soludo, 2003). Additionally, several countries historically faced highly disruptive civil wars, and their post-conflict reconstruction periods provided opportune moments for redirecting socio-economic and political trajectories (Potel & Gloria, 2022).

Research on critical junctures has provided insights into historical causation (Sorensen, 2023), explaining why opportunities for initiating change have either led to transformative outcomes when seized on time or resulted in policy stagnation and continuity due to missed chances (Capoccia & Kelemen, 2007). Critical juncture perspectives have been employed to analyse historical legacies, constitutional reforms, social justice, and policy change (Hogan, 2019; Paulson-Smith & Tripp, 2021). This paper focuses on identifying historical and ongoing critical junctures and examining how African countries have responded to them, particularly in the context of land governance. Land issues remain highly controversial in Africa's post-independence period; therefore, the African Union "has continued to advocate for secure land tenure and improved land governance systems as prerequisites for poverty reduction, sustainable development and peace and stability on the continent" (AU, 2021:7). Critical junctures have been closely linked with social reform worldwide, and in many parts of the Global South, several postcolonial periods have presented opportunities to address colonial legacies such as skewed land ownership patterns and tenure-related challenges (Home, 2021).

3. Methodological note

The paper aimed to analyse critical historical junctures and how these were missed or underutilised over time in post-independence Africa. The paper was constructed following an integrative review approach, which was intended to assess, critique, and synthesise literature on specific moments that offered opportunities for reforming land governance in independent Africa. To gather the literature, some of the databases used included Scopus, Google Scholar, JSTOR, African Journals Online (AJOL), and institutional repositories. From these sources, the study accessed and analysed peer-reviewed papers, books, official reports from organisations, monographs, grey literature, and policy briefs on land governance in Africa. The study performed a thematic synthesis by identifying key historical developments, such as the Cold War era, Structural Adjustment Programmes, and others, which were then evaluated in terms of how they presented opportunities to address land inequalities in African countries. In some cases, cross-case comparisons were conducted to highlight the diversity of experiences with land redistribution or reform during particular critical junctures.

4. Historical and ongoing critical junctures and control over land in Africa

Several historical and contemporary geopolitical and local dynamics have contributed to and continue to influence processes of access, ownership, and control over land in African nation-states. Not only have African governments missed critical opportunities to pursue justice in land ownership and rights, but their collusion with foreign forces has often worsened the situation. The result is the ongoing inheritance of injustices and vulnerabilities among marginalised groups. In the subsections below, the discussion focuses on specific historical

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critical junctures that were missed, as well as ongoing ones that may be overlooked or underutilised by African governments.

4.1 The Cold War era

The Cold War era (circa 1947-1991) opened Africa to competition between the superpowers of the East and West, both vying to influence newly independent African states (Wengraf, 2021). In this context, land reform became a key arena for ideological battles, pitting US capitalism against Soviet communism. Consequently, the direction of land reforms and redistribution in Africa was shaped by each government's political alignment. Aligning with the West-influenced market-driven land reforms—a strategy that generally failed to address historical injustices and instead promoted elitism in landholding, which widened disparities (Moyo, 2007). China and the USSR supported African countries aligned with their communist ideals, which led to the adoption of centralised, state-controlled land models, mainly in authoritarian regimes. The experience of Ghana under Nkrumah illustrates superpower rivalry in Africa. Initially aligned with the USA, Nkrumah's government promoted American investments and smallholder farming. However, he shifted focus toward large-scale state farms, reflecting a move from market-based to state-controlled land governance. Although intended to modernise agriculture, this shift created a tri-modal land tenure system prioritising state control and private ownership over traditional systems (Kunkel, 2022). This disrupted land tenure arrangements and worsened land ownership inequalities by marginalising traditional systems. Overall, superpower ideological rivalry introduced competing development models to Africa, influencing land reform and redistribution through aid and technical assistance tied to political loyalty rather than fairness. Western donors' priority was to have an agricultural model focused on export crops and high-yield varieties grown on large-scale, mechanised commercial farms (Alwang & Siegel, 2003). This exclusionary approach marginalised smallholders and displaced communities as land was consolidated for commercial exploitation. Africa's historical circumstances during the Cold War era indicate that governments had an opportunity to initiate the implementation of equitable land reforms based on the available political capital and the somewhat varied access to financial resources from three possible sources: former colonial masters, superpowers, and international financial institutions. For example, Britain gave Zimbabwe a total of £47 million in financial support for land reform, helping purchase 2.1 million hectares for resettlement (Njaya & Mazuru, 2010). The Cold War geopolitical influences distorted land policies through ideological biases, but the post-Cold War period allowed African political leaders "a more decisive role in shaping local institutions" (García-Ponce & Wantchekon, 2023:4). This presented an opportunity to create sustainable institutions for land governance, which would then lead to the establishment of legal frameworks for land reform, cadastres, and land registries. Where local capacity was limited, alliances with superpowers could have been leveraged to access technical support for land reform and redistribution programmes.

4.2 Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs)

The direct link between SAPs and land policies in African countries was based on SAPs' promotion of the security of property rights, which often meant prioritising individual titles to land even at the expense of communal land rights. In Zimbabwe, the Economic Structural Adjustment Programme (ESAP) influenced the country's land policy; however, as Moyo (2000) argued, it was not properly tailored to address the country's diversified agrarian system and dualistic economy. During the SAPs era, external donor pressures compromised state sovereignty over land governance, limiting the state's role in land redistribution and leaving everything to market forces. SAPs reflected a missed critical juncture for tackling historical land injustices because, as a phase of wide-ranging economic reforms where land policies could have been re-evaluated and land tenure systems re-shaped, it should have included aspects of transitional justice, such as land redistribution, restitution, and protection of customary land tenure (Mkandawire & Soludo, 2003). The complete omission of corrective measures regarding colonial socio-politico-economic legacies, such as land dispossession and inequitable landholding, made SAPs ahistorical and reflected a mere reshaping of African economies without any leeway to democratise land ownership. From the perspective of critical development theory, SAPs reflected a missed opportunity for handling the African land issue as a social right because they were never meant to promote

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equitable economic access. Rather, they constituted a chip from the capitalist block, meant to benefit the global capitalist system through its corporations, which were among the beneficiaries of the privatisation and commercialisation of land ownership on the continent (Chitonge, 2024). Policy options proposed in the SAPs had negative effects that worsened existing landholding issues. The prescription to 'roll back the frontiers of the state' saw governments being pushed back in land redistribution and social responsibility over vulnerable populations. The deregulation of land markets and the prioritisation of privatised individual land titles over customary communal systems deepened structural inequalities. SAPs' emphasis on the commodification of land and the formalisation of individual land titles triggered land speculation, which intensified patterns of land ownership among foreign entities and local elites (Moyo, 2000). These trends occurred because the new legal system required financial and legal capacity to protect land rights and secure individual titles, which the majority lacked under communal and customary tenure.

4.3 Land grabbing under globalisation and foreign investment

Neoliberal policies of the SAPs period further thrived in the globalisation wave, which promoted foreign investment by deregulating trade. The marketisation of land spurred a land rush fuelled by two key issues: the food crises in territories without arable land, and the global financial crisis of 2007/2008, which drove equity investors to seek new investments (Gilbert, 2017). There were also 'green grabs' driven by the push for carbon offsets, conservation programmes, and climate change mitigation strategies, resulting in investments in biofuels (Chitonge, 2024). International investors acquired vast expanses of land for the production of food, cash crops, and biofuels. However, the large-scale land acquisitions disregarded communal land systems and led to the dispossession and displacement of communities. It has been reported that at least 90% of land deals in Africa diverted land from local food production to green energy, mineral extraction, and carbon offsetting (Chomba & Belay, 2024). In recent years, a carbon trading UAE-based firm, Blue Carbon, bought 25 million hectares of forests and farmland in five African countries (Kenya, Liberia, Tanzania, Zambia, and Zimbabwe). In Kenya, however, the lack of consultations, the lack of equitable sharing of carbon benefits, and the violent displacement of the Ogiek community from their ancestral lands in the Mau Forest drew criticism and sparked controversy (Arko, 2024). With the foregoing experiences, the globalisation wave reflects an ongoing critical juncture being missed by African governments so far, in the sense that while the wave has brought significant foreign investments in food production, green energy and carbon offsetting, these have come at the expense of communities mostly under customary tenure who have been dispossessed to make way for the large-scale farmlands and forests acquired by foreign corporations. Through the uncritical adoption of market logics that entrench exclusionary tenure systems, governments are missing the opportunity for just, inclusive, and sustainable development, as well as social justice in land governance. Additionally, when governments commodified land and restructured investment laws to accommodate global capital, they missed the opportunity to expedite the legal recognition of customary tenure for local communities. Legal recognition would activate the principle of free, prior, and informed consent (FPIC), which is derived from the right to self-determination, in the event of proposals for large-scale investments. The FPIC serves to protect the rights of indigenous people in cases where investments encroach on their ancestral lands.

4.4 Military bases as imperial land footprints

Since the turn of the millennium, foreign powers (e.g., China, France, Germany, Italy, the United Kingdom, and the United States) have been setting military bases or establishing military presence, drone hubs, and other strategic infrastructure in countries such as Chad, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Djibouti, Equatorial Guinea, Niger, Mali, Senegal, and Somalia (Olumba, 2024). Strategically located countries such as Djibouti have ended up hosting multiple military bases. These imperial land footprints have only served to assert geopolitical influence, allowing them strategic access to resources, and perpetuating their hegemony. As Tricontinental (2023:1) explained in the case of US military presence, they are there to perform gendarme functions, including maintaining the smooth flow of raw material through shipping corridors and, overall, serving "as the guarantor of Western corporate interests and the principles of capitalism". Notably, African governments have hosted foreign

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military operations on communal land appropriated from local communities, often without fair compensation. The repurposing of communal lands to accommodate imperial interests reflects not only the continuation of colonial dynamics of land alienation and dispossession, but also the government's abrogation of its role in asserting land sovereignty and its failure to leverage negotiations with foreign powers for land governance that is inclusive and rights-based. As with the case of land grabbing, African governments could have resorted to international best practices and principles such as the FPIC to protect citizens' land rights. Additionally, governments could have made the terms of the bilateral agreements transparent and open to public scrutiny for accountability purposes.

4.5 The transition to multiparty democracy

Historically, transitions to multiparty democracy in Africa are critical moments that offer opportunities to address land inequalities through inclusive constitutional reforms and legislative changes that integrate principles of social justice, communal land rights, and equitable landholding. However, as shown in the cases below, these critical moments were largely missed because governments failed to seize the opportunity; in some cases, ethnic patronage, challenges of reform implementation, and gluttonous elitism thwarted the people's land revolution (Klopp, 2002). Kenya's transition to multiparty politics marked a period of reforming the constitution and land policy, driven by popular demands to improve land administration and land policy (Klopp, 2002). Public grievances over land were genuine—especially in areas like the Rift Valley—where land allocation during the Mau Mau uprising mainly benefited Kikuyu elites. Additionally, electoral violence in 1992, 1997, and 2007 was partly caused by unresolved land disputes (Dyzenhaus, 2021). During the multiparty era, President Mwai Kibaki invited public input, debates, and contributions to land policy reforms in 2002, which led to the adoption of a new constitution in 2010, a new national land policy in 2009, and the Land Acts of 2012 (Boone et al., 2019). The new constitution established the non-partisan National Land Commission, tasked with addressing historical land injustices and managing public land. However, implementing land law reforms in Kenya faced challenges due to the complexities of cooperation among involved institutions and stakeholders. Boone et al. (2019) observed that devolution of power to county governments complicated matters, since actors at various levels, with some veto powers, influenced reform processes, either delaying or hindering implementation driven by political interests. The elite's desire for land led them to manipulate land laws for their benefit, creating institutional blockages that left the majority frustrated (Boone et al., 2019).

The introduction of multiparty politics normally brings electoral competition—and in some cases, hyper-competitive party politics—which development should compel parties to prioritise addressing colonial legacies such as land redistribution, reform, and restitution. In the case of South Africa, the transition from apartheid to democracy in 1994 was marked by high expectations on the new ANC government to address land dispossession, inequality, and poverty (Clarke & Bassett, 2016). Expectedly, the campaign messaging of the ANC prioritised land restitution and redistribution. However, the ANC government initially adopted the 'willing buyer, willing seller' model, which was slow-moving, underfunded, and trapped in procedural inertia (Greenberg, 2004). Hence, to this day, not much land redistribution has taken place, and many South Africans in the countryside have insecure land rights. The phase of multiparty democracy further brings opportunities for the thriving of a vibrant civil society, playing roles of advocating and lobbying for the recognition of the rights of the dispossessed, landless, and those under insecure communal tenure. For instance, in South Africa, organisations such as the Landless People's Movement (LPM) arose in the post-apartheid period to advocate for an equitable land reform programme and challenge the government's preferred yet slow 'willing buyer, willing seller' model of land redistribution (Greenberg, 2004). However, the pushback efforts of CSOs are sometimes threatened by state repression and even assassinations of vocal activists, as was the case with Sikhosiphi 'Bazooka' Rhadebe in South Africa.

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4.6 Post-conflict reconstruction periods

Throughout the years, most reconstruction periods presented governments with windows of opportunity for social and political reconfiguration, including the restructuring of landholding, tenure systems, and restitution. Notable cases of such opportunities include post-war Angola, post-genocide Rwanda, and post-war Liberia and Sierra Leone. Several conflicts that have occurred in the past (e.g., Liberia, Rwanda, and South Sudan) were land-related. Where such conflicts are left unaddressed in post-conflict periods, they can easily degenerate into fresh conflicts. In Burundi, the return of displaced people almost disrupted peace in communities when they encountered difficulties reclaiming their rights to land (Theron, 2009). Rwanda presents a different and positive case. Before the genocide, insecurity over landholding fomented tensions between communities, and consequently, in the post-genocide period, addressing land ownership insecurities became a major priority for the government, which went on to enact laws and formulate policies such as the National Land Policy of 2004 (Potel & Gloria, 2022). This was followed by the implementation of the Land Tenure Regularisation (LTR) programme for the registration and administration of land ownership. By contrast, the cases of Angola and Liberia reflect squandered post-conflict opportunities for pursuing equitable land ownership, largely because attempts by governments to address land grievances had a bias towards elitist landholding, leaving communal land rights unsecured. While two-thirds of Angola's population were subsisting on land over which they had no tenure, the enactment of the Land Act of 2004—which aimed to formalise land rights—sidelined customary land tenure systems and prioritised registered titles (Forley, 2007). This perpetuated insecurities around communal land claims. Post-conflict periods, however, may pose challenges to processes meant to bring agrarian justice and secure land rights under communal tenure. Joireman & Tchatchoua-Djomo (2023) observed three possible post-conflict changes to customary land tenure systems, that is, (i) Erosion, where the existence of customary tenure systems is threatened as in the cases of Burundi and Sudan; (ii) Adaptation, where customary land tenure shifts to accommodate diverse needs as in the case of northern Uganda; and (iii) Replacement, where the post-conflict period provides the opportunity for replacing customary tenure with statutory tenure, as happened in Rwanda. In addition, land restitution may be complicated where only some and not all of the displaced populations return, and where no land records showing the boundaries, occupation, and value exist (Joireman & Tchatchoua-Djomo, 2023).

4.7 The rise of Pan-African institutions and frameworks

Opportunities for transformation could arise from Pan-African institutions such as the AU, NEPAD, and regional policy initiatives like the Land Policy Initiative, the Framework and Guidelines on Land Policy in Africa, African Union Declaration on Land Issues and Challenges (2009), and more recently, the Land Governance Strategies (LGS) 2023-2032. These have played a key role in driving the urgency for addressing land-related challenges in member states by mobilising collective commitment and providing a unified policy platform for addressing colonial legacies in land ownership, as well as offering technical support and capacity building for rural transformation (AUDA-NEPAD, 2019). The AU has continued supporting member states in developing and implementing land policies. However, pan-African institutions have faced institutional weaknesses that have limited their effectiveness. For example, the non-binding nature of some of these frameworks has allowed member states to ignore or partially implement them. In some cases, the prioritisation of national sovereignty over regional frameworks hampers the implementation of African land policies (Nyah et al., 2025). Additionally, there are no effective mechanisms for monitoring and evaluation, which prevents the tracking of progress and measuring the impact.

4.8 Digital land governance reforms

There is a growing trend of digital land governance reforms, involving digital land registries, satellite imagery, land records based on blockchain, and the use of mobile platforms for land-related services (Ndugwa & Omusula, 2025). The transformative potential of these reforms could help modernise land administration, simplify procedures for land titling, democratise land access, reduce the cost of land transfer services, and improve transparency in handling land issues, which together minimise land disputes and corruption (Bar & Dossa, 2025).

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To date, at least four African countries have undertaken efforts to digitise land governance. Among these, Rwanda pioneered the reforms, completing work on digitising the national cadastre and land registry in 2023 (Haugerud et al., 2024). Two key developments stand out: first, the implementation of the Land Tenure Regularisation Programme (2007-2012), which formalised land rights for the majority of people and included mapping and titling parcels of land; second, the deployment of the Land Administration Information System, an online centralised digital land registry. In 2021, Kenya launched *ArdhiSasa*, a programme that automated land-related services, starting with converting paper land registries into electronic formats. Ghana experimented with a blockchain land registry in 2017 (Haugerud et al., 2024). Other countries such as Botswana, Nigeria, Uganda, and Zambia have also adopted various digital tools in land administration. While the digitisation of land governance offers significant promise in tackling some of its most pressing challenges, realising these benefits depends on strengthening institutional capacities, adopting participatory approaches, ensuring the availability of land data records, and promoting community-based land management (Bar & Dossa, 2025). Furthermore, the opportunities presented by digital technology in land governance can only be fully realised in contexts where an appropriate regulatory framework is in place (Deininger & Goyal, 2023).

5. Emerging explanatory factors behind missed junctures

The missing or underutilisation of critical junctures for equitable land reforms and redistribution often resulted from political expedience and elite interests, which foster elite resistance to grassroots pressure for land reform. The primary goal of elite strategies has been either maintaining or gaining personal power or wealth by manipulating land tenure rules to create land communities and decide which ones should remain under customary tenure (Rose, 2002). Realising how land is inextricably linked with the maintenance and retention of political power, African elites in clientelistic systems have used it as part of patronage schemes to gain political support, in open disregard for an equitable, systematic, and programmatic approach to land redistribution (Chavunduka, 2018). In Kenya, for instance, it is not uncommon for political leaders to manipulate access to and control over land by mobilising exclusive ethnic enclaves. Historically, those who gained land ownership during the Kenyatta and Moi regimes were hesitant and even opposed efforts for land redistribution (Moskowitz, 2024). In South Africa, the land question has perennially remained "an unquiet ghost haunting the national imagination" in the post-apartheid era (du Toit, 2024:207). Two reasons have been put forward to explain the long wait: first, despite the constitutional provision for equitable access to land, there has not been sufficient political will to do it, if at all; second, the land reform assumed a class agenda and consequently lost its pro-poor focus to prioritise medium- and large-scale black farmers (Cousins, 2021). The complex relationship between land and politics explains how political preferences are formed and how they influence decisions regarding settlement, dispossession, and land-related inequality.

In numerous cases, newly independent African states inherited colonial systems of administration, which, as Imaka & Ebiede (2025) explain, were institutions "built for domination and resource extraction, not inclusive governance". As a result, post-independence governments struggled to reform these to suit the post-independence developmental agendas, such as equitable land redistribution, because the state itself was largely a Western creation with no roots in the economy and society (Hyden, 2020). What was missing was a strong administrative apparatus and the requisite experienced and skilled personnel to successfully implement the state's developmental ideals. In Nigeria, the land reform provided for in the Land Use Act of 1978 was affected by the state's weak vertical enforcement capacity, which led to the continued existence of a dual system of statutory and customary land tenure (Tan, 2025). In other cases, the land reforms implemented by post-independence African governments generated limited impact because governments had limited capacity to reorganise the peasantry. Budgetary inadequacies equally played a part in delaying land redistribution programmes; for example, in South Africa, the land reform programme received less than 0.4% of the national budget between 1994 and 1998 (Wily & Mbaya, 2000).

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The capacity challenges and economic crises often led African governments to seek financial assistance from international financial institutions, and this opened doors for external influence whose conditionalities dictated the nature and focus of reforms. Notably, in land governance, the reforms recommended were far removed from the path of social justice and equitable redistribution. Preference was given to neoliberal land reform programmes, which prioritised deregulation, private land ownership, and security of property rights. However, sustained popular demands for land redistribution disproved that neoliberal model (Moyo, 2007). The influences of external forces demonstrate the complexities of the nexus between the global financial systems and the autonomy of developing countries in the making of development choices. It mirrors a relationship of 'unequals' predicated on neoliberal schemes, which has been interpreted by some as a manifestation of an incomplete process of decolonisation in former colonies—making the persisting African land issue "a by-product of globalised control of land" (Moyo, 2007:1). With the foregoing indictment, externally-driven reform initiatives can only be acceptable if the intentions of external actors are in sync with the local agenda of the recipient country (Takeuchi & Marara, 2021). Some of the reform efforts made so far have unduly emphasised technical approaches that tend to assume neutrality and, therefore, are somewhat limited in addressing historical land injustices, which by nature are deeply political issues. Technocratic reforms primarily focused on legally formalising land tenure systems and promoting economic development, without necessarily addressing land redistribution issues. The Flexible Land Tenure System (FLTS) in Namibia, for instance, improved land registration and tenure security in urban areas but did not tackle land redistribution, which should have addressed widespread land inequalities in rural areas (Christensen, 2015). Similarly, Uganda implemented land administration reforms without directly addressing land inequalities rooted in historical injustices (Ndugwa & Omusula, 2025). Internationally, the global land community outside Africa is increasingly adopting the 'pro-poor land administration' paradigm, supported by tools such as the pro-poor land recordation tool (PPLRT), which "contains a set of design elements developed to improve protection and access to land for the poor, particularly women, youth and vulnerable groups" (Hendriks et al., 2019:21). While acknowledging that Africa's digital land governance has already started with the adoption of 'fit-for-purpose land administration' tools, deliberate focus on the poor and vulnerable has been missing or at least under-emphasised (Home, 2021). Questions still linger on the advancement of social justice in the transition from manual to digital land administration forms, mainly because of Africa's digital divide and weak e-readiness, which have already impacted technological access and inclusion of the rural poor in other areas such as e-government, e-services, and e-democracy (Haugerud et al., 2024). The region's digital transformation has generally been slow.

The role of civil society in mobilising for equitable land ownership has been quite limited during critical moments; yet, the expectation is that a strong and unified civil society should demand land justice and carry out sustained advocacy, leading to transformational land reforms, especially during key historical periods (Bellem, 2023). Challenges often arise from the competing priorities and interests of civil society organisations due to the diversity of constituencies they represent, including rural farmers, the urban poor, and pastoralists, among others. These issues may be further complicated by ideological differences, where preferences may differ between radical land reform and neoliberal approaches. In contexts where the state co-opts some groups, their ideological preferences are likely to align with state ideology. The concentration of African civil society in urban areas has left grassroots rural struggles underrepresented (Moyo, 2005). Moreover, the urban-rural disconnect between urban social movements and their rural counterparts has not only led to fragmentation but also impacted the coherence of messaging for land reforms (Leonard, 2014). Despite the weaknesses, there are a few demonstrative cases of coordinated engagement between civil society and the state, as well as strategic alliances among civil society organisations in land reform dialogues. For example, the Uganda Land Alliance—a consortium of over 60 non-governmental organisations—has been working to promote people-centred land governance and has been very influential in fighting for the protection and enforcement of land rights. Elsewhere, the coalition of civil society organisations in Senegal influenced the direction of the reform process by fighting for the protection of communal land rights and advocating for an inclusive and participatory land reform, which involved mobilising rural stakeholders to voice their concerns in shaping land policy (Delville et al., 2021). The Senegalese civil

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society further initiated and informed public debate, producing studies and frameworks shared at workshops and meetings.

Conclusion

Colonial land governance structures and mechanisms have largely persisted in post-independence Africa, despite various attempts at land reforms. The post-independence period has had several opportunities to challenge inherited land governance structures, and this paper focused on identifying and discussing specific critical historical and ongoing moments that offered chances to revolutionise land governance. Observations in the paper indicate that many past opportunities were largely missed or underutilised by African governments, and consequently, the continued existence of colonial land institutions has entrenched skewed ownership and maintained path dependencies such as legal pluralism, which hinder smooth reforms. The paper notes that factors including elite interests, political expediency, institutional inertia, weak state capacity, external influences, neutral technocratic approaches, and fragmentation of civil society drove the underutilisation of critical reform junctures. From these missed opportunities, future potential windows include climate-related displacements, youth activism, and women's movements. Moving forward, reforms should be driven by inclusive political coalitions involving grassroots actors, youth, women, and vulnerable groups to ensure legitimacy and acceptance. Civil society also needs stronger coordination through strategic alliances and shared strategies to influence land reforms. Approaches adopted should decentre neoliberalism to reflect African realities and contextual imperatives better. Theoretically, this paper makes its contribution through its attempt to bridge the concept of critical junctures and the domain of land governance, which has been underexplored to date, mostly because critical junctures as an analytical lens are commonly applied in historical institutionalism and political science.

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