THE CONTENTIOUS POLITICS OF URBANIZATION: Insights from Africa

by Jeffrey W. Paller

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On January 21, 2020, residents of Tarkwa Bay in Lagos, Nigeria awoke to gunfire. The Nigerian Navy forcefully removed nearly 4,500 residents from their homes in the informal settlement along the waterfront, following an "order from above." The NGO Justice & Empowerment Initiatives estimate that more than 2.3 million Nigerians have been forcefully evicted from their homes in the past twenty years (Kazeem 2020). But residents are not passive bystanders: they protest the evictions, demand accountability from their political representatives, bargain with traditional authorities and landowners, and take governments to court. These political dynamics in African cities disrupt the national political landscape by instigating legal and policy reforms, pressuring government representatives to action, and emboldening opposition parties and other non-state actors.

Urbanization is a contentious political process where population growth leads to competing and often conflicting claims on a city.

This contentious political process is happening across Africa as rising urbanization places population pressure on cities and raises property values. The forms of contentious politics differ across distinct historical and institutional contexts, challenging dominant social science paradigms that treat urbanization as a linear process associated with economic modernization and bureaucratization. In this essay, I outline a framework to understand urbanization that sets relevant political factors in motion, treating cities and urban neighborhoods as receptacles of social interaction and "active sites of creation and change" (McAdam et al. 2003, 22).

My research contributes to a growing literature that applies political economy analysis to urban politics in the Global South. Groundbreaking books uncover the importance of ethnic demography and political participation in Ghana (Nathan 2019), the role of neighborhood organizations in demanding development in India (Auerbach 2019), and the calculations of political elites in Colombia and Peru (Holland 2017). These political economy approaches to urban development uncover the diversity of political forms both within and across cities in the Global South. My approach draws from these insights, but adds an overlooked dimension: the role of urban citizenship and claims to urban space.

I suggest treating urbanization as a contentious political process where population growth leads to competing and often conflicting claims on a city. Drawing from Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow, and Charles Tilly's insights in *Dynamics of Contention,* contentious politics are "Episodic,

public, collective interaction among makers of claims and their objects when a) at least one government is a claimant, and object of claims, or a party to the claims and b) the claims would, if realized, affect the interests of at least one of the claimants" (2003, 5). A focus on processes, episodes, and mobilization better captures the dynamic political struggle that urban growth entails, as well as the particular trajectory of urban political development that emerges. This follows in the tradition of other comparative politics scholarship that considers social and political processes like religious fundamentalism and foreign policy decision-making as nonlinear (e.g. Tabaar 2019; Hintz 2018). This switches the focus from a static cross-sectional approach to politics that treat actors, institutions, and interests as fixed and unchanging to one where resistance, bargaining, and participation can change the political landscape.

Africa provides a useful backdrop to uncover the set of interactive mechanisms that spur mobilization and episodes of contention during the process of urbanization. Unlike urbanization elsewhere, Africa is urbanizing without large-scale industrialization. Violent conflicts, faulty agricultural policies, failing state institutions, and centralized political development and economic investments spur African urbanization – not the pull of manufacturing jobs. It is also the last region to experience widespread urban growth. In 1970, only 18 percent of Africans lived in cities; this number increased to 40 percent by 2018. According to the United Nation's population division, 472 million Africans are now estimated to live in cities, with the number increasing each day. The region's 3.5 percent urbanization rate is the fastest in the world today with 21 of the 30 fastest growing cities in Africa. 74 urban agglomerations have more than 1 million people.

Throughout Africa's past, cities experienced skewed land allocation, invasions and squatting, immigrant and population expulsions, demolitions, exclusive urban planning and the formation of parallel governance structures (Klopp and Paller 2019). Migration and the growth of non-native populations in cities can contribute to new social conflict, either in the formation of new identities or the politicization of ethnic and indigenous identities. As urbanization continues, there is new pressure on land acquisition, leading to multiple claimants of property, which contributes to winners and losers. But Africa's urban history is also one of creativity, cooperation, bargaining, deliberation, and debate.

The essay proceeds as follows. First, I outline the relevant mechanisms that characterize the contentious politics of urbanization. Second, I compare four cities in Africa – Accra (Ghana), Cape Town (South Africa), Nairobi (Kenya), and Lagos (Nigeria). Third, I illustrate the contentious politics of urbanization in these four cases, using examples of forced evictions and demolitions to illustrate the argument. Finally, I conclude with the implications of this approach to the study of urbanization and urban politics.

Mechanisms of contentious urbanization

In *Dynamics of Contention*, McAdam et al. advance a theory of social movements based on collective political struggle and the dynamism of political action. By setting conventional theories of social movements in motion, the authors blur the lines between institutionalized and noninstitutionalized politics. They uncover important environmental, cognitive, and relational mechanisms that lead to transformations in society. This societal transformation is spurred by

a political process made up of episodes of contention, or "continuous streams of contention including collective claims making that bears on other parties' interests" (McAdam et al. 2003, 24).

Typically, urbanization is viewed as a static environmental mechanism that sets the political process in motion (Lipset 1959; Inglehart 1997). By contrast, I suggest that urbanization (defined as the shift from a rural to urban society) – through the movement of people from rural to urban areas, the designation of rural areas to urban, or natural population increase in cities – is a contentious political process involving new and competing claims to space and territory. While an environmental mechanism that is exogenous to demographic change might trigger the process, contentious politics unfolds through mechanisms including new attributions of threat and opportunity, the social appropriation of existing organizations, framing and reframing of identities, innovative forms of collective action, and brokerage. For example, urbanization can create speculative investment opportunities for the business and political elite but also spur the reemergence of nativist claims to urban space by traditional authorities and indigenous groups. Residents find innovative strategies to claim rights to the city by forming new alliances with NGOs and engaging in relationships with political patrons. By examining urbanization as a contentious political process, we gain a more empirically accurate picture of what urbanization entails, and how it manifests across time and space.

Table 1: Mechanisms of contentious urbanization

New attributions of threat and opportunity	Threats to political control Threat of urban displacement Opportunities for land speculation
Social appropriation of existing organizations	Reemergence of ethnic associations Reemergence of traditional authorities Membership in human rights organizations
Framing and reframing of identities	Construction of insider-outsider; host-migrant; native-newcomer identities New entitlements to urban citizenship
Innovative forms of collective action	Protests Construction of slum dweller associations Land occupations
Brokerage	Political clientelism Diaspora connections NGO capture

Cases of African urbanization

Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria and South Africa make good case comparisons because they vary along key dimensions that social scientists suggest should explain political outcomes: state capacity, extent of democracy, and degree of urbanization. Ghana and South Africa are two of the most urbanized countries in Africa, 56 percent and 66 percent respectively. Nigeria became 50 percent urban in 2018, with Kenya lagging far behind at 27 percent (these estimates are reported by country, and not standardized across countries). Ghana and South Africa score high on democracy, rule of law and governance indicators, with Kenya lagging behind. Nigeria falls toward the bottom on most indicators. Despite these varying degrees of state capacity and extent of democracy, all countries have notable episodes of contention that illustrate the urbanization process (see Table 2, below).

All four countries look to their major cities to drive the economy. Governments and planners desire to build "world class" cities, and aim to attract massive investment from foreign governments or multinational companies to build sports stadiums, modern central business districts, gated communities, and entirely new satellite cities. To make way for these high-end developments, cities engage in what some scholars have called "urban cleaning," where government forces including the police and military destroy "illegal" slum settlements (Raleigh 2015). Evictions and displacements have occurred in Zimbabwe (2005, 2007), Angola (2007), Kenya (2008, 2009, 2010), Nigeria (2000, 2009), Sudan (2005), South Africa (2010), Ethiopia (2011, 2017), Uganda (2011), and many other countries.

Forced evictions are also inherently political. For example, demolitions in Kenya were used to curb popular dissent, as well as a way to punish

Table 2: Summary of cases and documented episodes of contention

	Ghana	South Africa	Kenya	Nigeria
Degree urbanization 2018	56% urban	66% urban	27% urban	50% urban
Fragile States Index 2019 (100=Most fragile)	65.9	71.1	93.5	98.5
Government Effectiveness 2018 (Worldwide Governance Indicators)	-.21	.34	-.41	-1.02
Rule of Law 2018 (Worldwide Governance Indicators)	.07	-.10	-.41	-.88
	Accra	**Cape Town**	**Nairobi**	**Lagos**
COHRE documented evictions (1995-2008)	5	3	12	18
AllAfrica episodes of contention 2018-2020	5	52	59	13

opponents and reward loyal followers (Klopp 2008). Urban construction provides politicians numerous opportunities to engage in corruption and rent seeking. Traditional authorities, especially those who claim ownership or custodianship of urban property, flex their muscles and profit from skyrocketing land prices. Governments justify evictions and demolitions as a way to curb public health outbreaks, fight criminality, and prevent flooding. The urban poor are forced to rely on innovative forms of collective action to confront evictions, demolitions, and removal.

I developed a media events database to identify "episodes of contention" in Accra, Nairobi, Lagos and Cape Town between 1995-2020. I defined episodes of contention as incidents of competing or conflicting claims to urban space that lead to the actual or threat of eviction, demolition, or forced displacement. These episodes also include the response from neighborhood residents, politicians, and municipal authorities. I drew from *AllAfrica.com* newspaper articles between 2018-2020 (a sub-section of the database) and the Center on Housing Rights and Evictions, a Geneva-based nongovernmental organization's Forced Eviction surveys 7-11 (1998-2008). While these sources did not document all episodes of contention that occur during this period, they offered a systematic accounting of episodes.

Progressive housing policies: Ghana and South Africa

Ghana and South Africa are both urbanized societies with high levels of democratic engagement and rule of law, which have contributed to progressive housing policies. But South Africa's history of socio-economic disparities and protest contributes to far more episodes of contention today. South Africa is notable for its progressive constitution that includes the right to adequate housing and protects against unlawful eviction. The governing ANC claims to have built 3.2 million homes between 1994-2018. While Ghana does not have positive rights in place for housing in its constitution, it has devised a National Urban Plan, National Housing Policy, and National Spatial Development Plan, which include protections for the poor.

However, both countries struggle to overcome historical legacies of spatial inequalities due to colonial zoning policies and residential segregation. Cape Town has a long history of political and social exclusion dating back to the 17th century, which deepened during British and Afrikaans rule. Between the 1960s-1980s, the government used the Group Areas Act to remove blacks, coloureds, and Indians from the city. Accra grew from a small fishing village made up of the Ga ethnic group, to a heterogeneous city that is inhabited by people from dozens of different groups. Throughout colonial rule and independence, the integration of migrants into the city contributed to new disputes between insiders and outsiders. The importance of international organizations like the World Bank and aid organizations in urban planning shifts incentives on the ground, and provide new sources of funding for infrastructure upgrading.

Despite progressive legal policy and democratic politics, housing and urban space is limited in both cities, contributing to competing claims over land and housing. In the early 2000s, the City of Cape Town evicted shack dwellers from their homes to make way for a large housing project, a World Cup stadium, and a private development. In Ghana, the government ordered

30,000 people living in an informal settlement to vacate their land, evicted veterans from their homes, removed traders from a large market, and demolished structures to clear waterways.

In both cities, similar mechanisms are at work, including new attributions of threat and opportunity, social appropriation of existing organizations, framing and reframing of identities, and brokerage. For example, residents without land titles are framed as criminals and barriers to development. Developers then take advantage of these tenure insecurities and seek new opportunities for real estate development and land speculation. In Ghana, indigenous Ga organizations socially appropriated the chieftaincy institution to claim ownership and governance of neighborhoods, and framed migrants as squatters or "trespassers in the city." In response, non-profit organizations emerged to protect the urban poor, serving as brokers between municipal authorities and residents on the ground. Adding to the contention, major political parties like the ANC, New Patriotic Party, and National Democratic Congress politicized these relationships over time.

In the last two years, Accra has relatively few episodes of contention (5 in total). Various municipal authorities have demolished structures along waterways to curb the annual flooding that affects the city. Political parties continue to serve as important brokers and contribute to the persistence of informal settlement growth, which I document in *Democracy in Ghana: Everyday Politics in Urban Africa* (Paller 2019).

In contrast, episodes of contention are engrained in the fabric of Cape Town everyday life. I identified 52 episodes of contention in the last two years in the townships and suburbs of Cape Town. Most are shack demolitions, subsequent rebuilds, service delivery protests, and gatherings at court when eviction notices are served. Residents frame their activity as "land occupations," and have support from the social movement organization Reclaim the City, as well as the news outlet *GroundUp*. In response, the City of Cape Town formed an Anti-Land Invasion Unit that in 2009 to stop people from illegally occupying land and is the city's biggest law enforcement operation.

The framing of identities is important in this struggle: the residents use the term occupiers, while the city uses invaders. Landlords hire "red-ants" – private security agents – to demolish shacks on private land. Most of these demolitions occur after court-ordered eviction letters are granted, though there are many disputes over the process. Organizations use innovative forms of collective action. For example, Reclaim the City partnered with the world-famous guerilla activists The Yes Men and staged a "zombie rally" after sending out a press release spoof stating that the city agreed to all of their demands (Wayland and Geffen 2019). Cape Town's population growth is part and parcel of a contentious political process that has its roots in a long history of racial segregation and exclusion.

Urban land regimes and authoritarian legacies: Kenya and Nigeria

Kenya and Nigeria have long histories of exploitation, marginalization, and segregation. These histories of authoritarianism shape violent government responses to urban growth and development today. Colonial authorities founded Nairobi in 1899 as a railway depot. British authorities settled in the "leafy" areas, while the black laboring poor settled informally in low-lying environs nearby employment opportunities. Landlord-tenant agreements developed into

entrenched patron-client relationships between politicians and residents, as well as ethnically defined residential patterns.

Lagos Island was originally inhabited by several villages of Yoruba people, who developed a growing trade network with other Africans, Portuguese, and freed slaves from Brazil. The legal system institutionalized the authority of indigenous landowners after independence, giving them considerable control over land. Kenya became a multi-party democracy in 2002, while Nigeria overcame its military government in 1999. The legacy of authoritarian rule in urban Nigeria and Kenya is still felt today. The number of COHRE-recorded episodes of contention between 1995-2010 is significantly higher than Ghana and South Africa, as both countries had weak legal protections. Lagos had 18 episodes, and Nairobi experienced 12. Dating back to 1996, Lagos State identified 11 slums for eviction, setting the stage for contention for years to come. They evicted fisher folk from waterfront communities, traders from markets, students from universities, and shack dwellers from at least eight informal settlements.

Informal settlements in both cities provide significant opportunities for land speculation. In Nigeria, most informal settlements are waterfront communities, making them some of the most valuable property in the city. Residents in Kenyan neighborhoods also face the threat of urban displacement, giving politicians more power to serve as a powerful voice and protector of their livelihoods. For example, Nairobi City County Governor Mike Sonko declared after one demolition, "I will be the first to die before you are evicted. We don't want that nonsense. God knows why you are living in slums. It is not your choice." (Ndonga 2019).

These eviction threats spur counter-mobilization: social appropriation of existing organizations and innovative forms of collective action. Slum dweller associations emerged with the help of the international alliance Slum/Shack Dwellers International. Muungano wa Wanavijiji in Nairobi and Justice & Empowerment Initiatives in Lagos became social movements and political actors in their own right, reframing slum dweller rights as human rights, with the support of Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch.

Between 2018-2020, there were 59 episodes of contention in Nairobi. Many of these episodes took place in August 2018 and were the result of the National Environmental Management Authority's directive to demolish all "illegal structures" on riparian lands. Politicians quickly politicized these demolitions. In addition, government companies and agencies like Kenya Railways, Kenya Pipeline Company, and Kenya Urban Roads Authority evicted thousands of people, including 20,000 people in Kibera to make way for a highway. Many demolitions took place in the middle of the night – called "midnight demolitions" – and residents claim they did not receive proper notice, despite court orders.

Unlike Nairobi, Lagos did not engage in a large-scale demolition campaign. There were 13 notable episodes of contention that included demolishing buildings that were not up to code, removal of stalls from markets, and the demolition of homes to make way for a modern bus terminal. The most contentious demolition occurred in Tarkwa Bay, introduced in the beginning of this essay. The Nigerian Slum/Informal Settlement Federation led protests against these evictions. Nonetheless, broker-

age continues to play an important role in Lagos' development, as powerful traditional families like the Elegushi partner with politicians to grab land and displace slum dwellers; the diaspora invests in gated communities; and NGOs broker the relationship between poor communities and municipal government.

Implications for the study of urbanization

Recent studies demonstrate that community organizations and social movements devise strategies beyond protests and demonstrations to secure urban housing, protect tenure security, and implement pro-poor policies (Mitlin 2018; Donaghy 2018). But evidence from the media events database suggests that contentious politics in Africa's largest and most important cities still shapes the urbanization process and requires attention in the study of urbanization. These urban political dynamics have the potential to disrupt national politics across the continent, but this essay demonstrates how the outcomes will vary across contexts.

The comparative method sheds light on the political mechanisms underlying urbanization. In Nairobi, Cape Town, and Accra parties and politicians play important roles in protecting and representing the poor – but are also accused of engaging in corruption and land grabbing. Politicians are quick to paint certain groups as threats, while claiming to protect others from imminent eviction (Klaus 2020). In Lagos and Accra, indigenous landowners are important brokers in the urban development process. In all four cases, international organizations have reframed slum rights as human rights, drawing new attention to urban citizenship.

In addition, historical legacies of inequality – many of which are direct outcomes of colonialism and Apartheid – continue to shape public policy. Framing the urban poor as dirty and criminal is a political tool that has its roots in colonial-era urban planning, and is used to legitimize slum removal and renewal schemes. Finally, the politics of belonging underlies the contentious politics of urbanization, resulting in tension between host and migrant populations.

These insights from Africa extend far beyond the continent, demonstrating that urbanization across the world is a contentious process, contributing to episodes of competing claims, the assertion of urban citizenship, and the emergence of new and the reaffirmation of old political actors and identities. ●

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