COMMENTARY

Migration within Africa and Beyond

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On January 27, 2017, the week-old Trump administration temporarily banned immigration to the United States from seven countries, including three in Africa (Libya, Somalia, and Sudan), and blocked refugees from all countries. The executive order prompted protests around the world and drew attention to the plight of refugees and migrants. Community groups held town hall meetings, and refugee service organizations saw a jump in contributions and volunteers.[1] Social media were awash with stories about people whose lives were upended when the ban prevented them from seeking medical care in the United States or reuniting with loved ones. But the executive order also had supporters, including some who called for a boycott of Budweiser over a commercial about its founder's arriving in America as a refugee from Germany in the 1850s.

The recent furor about immigration in the United States is only the latest chapter in a lengthy global saga. In 2015 all eyes were on Europe as it struggled to manage a rapid increase in the number of refugees and

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migrants, mainly from the Middle East and Africa. Even as Hungary, Slovenia, Austria, and Bulgaria hastily erected razor-wire border fences, Germany announced plans to admit eight hundred thousand asylum seekers. Anti-immigrant protests in many cities were matched by equally passionate rallies in favor of welcoming migrants. While the specifics were different, the arguments were reminiscent of similar debates in the U.S. in the 1830s or 1920s or in Europe in the 1930s. For centuries, the effort by migrants to seek better lives in new countries has been met with a mix of hospitality and hostility by citizens of those countries.

Given how the recent migration "crisis" has been portrayed in the media, one might think that Europe is being overrun. Consider these headlines: "As Europe Grasps for Answers, More Migrants Flood Its Borders" (*The New York Times*, Sept. 7, 2015); "A Global Surge in Refugees Leaves Europe Struggling to Cope" (*The Washington Post*, April 21, 2015); and "Crisis Warnings Sound as E.U. Gears Up for New Migrant Wave" (*The Seattle Times*, Jan. 15, 2017).[2] Since a large number of the migrants discussed in these articles are from African countries, there is an impression that people are desperate to get out of the region. Few articles explain why people are migrating beyond a passing reference to "war, persecution and poverty in an arc of strife from West Africa to Afghanistan" (Faiola 2015).

Most accounts also overlook the fact that the majority of African migration takes place within Africa itself. When Africans leave home, more often than not they move to nearby countries. Geographic proximity allows them to return home to visit family, or to return permanently if circumstances change. Some migrate farther to regional hubs like South Africa, Côte d'Ivoire, or Nigeria, but relatively few go to Europe or the United States. According to a recent International Monetary Fund report, about 13 million of the 19.6 million sub-Saharan Africans living outside their home countries in 2013 migrated within the region (Gonzalez-Garcia et al. 2016).[3] Migration within Africa is not new; even as the nature of borders has changed markedly from precolonial times to the present (Herbst 2000), Africans have long been on the move.

Just as Europeans and Americans have mixed reactions to the influx of immigrants, so do Africans. In recent years, anti-immigrant hostility has increased throughout the region, and governments have cracked down. The rise of xenophobia in South Africa has been well-documented, manifesting itself in periodic violence against Somalis, Zimbabweans, and others (Charman & Piper 2012; Danso & McDonald 2001; Gordon & Maharaj 2015; Landau 2010, 2011; Neocosmos 2010; Nyamnjoh 2006). In Côte d'Ivoire, antiforeigner rhetoric and policies contributed to a civil conflict that divided the country for nearly a decade (Bah 2010; Bassett 2011; Mitchell 2011, 2012; Whitaker 2015). After years of welcoming refugees, Tanzania has forcibly expelled half a million Rwandans since the late 1990s and limited the admission and movement of others (Chaulia 2003; Kamanga 2005; Rutinwa 1996; Whitaker 1999, 2003a). And the Botswana

government has electrified a border fence and dramatically reduced its granting of refugee status to asylum seekers (Campbell 2003; Nyamnjoh 2002, 2006).

In Kenya, the refugee controversy is ongoing. In May 2016 the government announced plans to close all camps by November and repatriate their residents (Whitaker 2016). The move targeted especially 330,000 Somalis, some of whom have lived in Kenya for decades. Under pressure from human rights advocates and the United Nations, the government extended the deadline by six months. But in February 2017 the High Court ruled that the closure plan violates international law, specifically the principle of non-refoulement, and blocked its implementation.[4] Human rights activists celebrated, while the government vowed to appeal. Legal wrangling in Kenya and the United States, where the Trump administration's executive order was similarly challenged, coupled with continuing insecurity in their home country, left thousands of Somali refugees in limbo (Anyadike 2017). Meanwhile, the Kenyan military continued construction of a razor-wire fence that will eventually run along the entire 440-mile border with Somalia (Otsialo 2016).[5]

Although the winds of hostility are blowing strong, there are still countries in Africa where migrants get a more hospitable reception. Uganda, for example, has been lauded for a policy that provides land and education to refugees and allows them to work and move around the country (Patton 2016). Due to the ongoing violence in South Sudan, Uganda received far more refugees in 2016 (489,000) than the total number that crossed the Mediterranean to Europe (362,000) (Reuters 2017). Zambia also has maintained relatively welcoming policies toward refugees, though it has faced less of an influx in recent years. And even as Tanzania has developed stricter polices on refugee admission and status determination, it has granted citizenship to thousands of long-time refugees from Burundi and Somalia. At a summit of the African Union on January 30, 2017, United Nations Secretary General Antonio Guterres praised African countries for keeping borders "open for those in need of protection when so many borders are being closed" (Associated Press 2017).[6] Much as in other regions, therefore, refugees and migrants in Africa face a complicated and sometimes unpredictable combination of hospitality and hostility.

Challenging Conventional Wisdom

There are many ways in which African experiences challenge commonly held assumptions about migration, not just within the region but more broadly. Conventional wisdom holds, for example, that migrants face more hostility if they are culturally different from their hosts in terms of religion, language, or other traits. There is some evidence from Europe for this (Brader, Valentino, & Suhay 2008; Ford 2011; Hainmueller & Hangartner 2013), but experiences in Africa suggest otherwise. Adida (2014) finds that cultural similarities between migrants and hosts make relations worse, not

better, as leaders of both communities are motivated to highlight differences in order to maintain their authority. Moreover, culturally diverse countries are not necessarily more welcoming to additional diversity in the form of immigrants. Survey data show that opposition to immigration is in fact significantly higher in more ethnically diverse African countries (Whitaker & Giersch 2015), perhaps because these countries already face contentious debates about the rights of citizenship among different groups.

African experiences also challenge the simplistic distinction between "migrant" and "refugee." International law defines a refugee as someone who flees his or her home country due to a well-founded fear of persecution on the basis of race, religion, nationality, or membership in a social group. Being a refugee is thus inherently political. A migrant, in contrast, seeks better economic opportunities. But people migrate for multiple reasons, including a combination of economic hardship and a lack of political voice. Poor economic conditions often are the result of ineffective governance by repressive authoritarian governments. The collapse of Zimbabwe's economy in the early 2000s, for example, was driven in part by politically motivated land grab policies implemented by Robert Mugabe's government. Even as domestic critics of these policies were being punished for their dissent, other governments in the region, including those of Botswana and South Africa, denied admission to thousands of Zimbabweans arriving at their borders on the basis that they were migrants and not refugees. Similarly, as Dan Connell argued recently in this journal, Eritrea "masks the political origins" of the recent out-migration of as much as 15 percent of its population by "insisting they are 'migrants,' not refugees"; this "is a fiction that's convenient for destination countries . . . [that are] eager for a rationale for turning the Eritreans (and others) away" (2016:219). With politics and economics clearly interconnected, one cannot determine which is to blame for outmigration. As long as governments continue to identify these people as migrants, however, producing states can avoid political embarrassment and receiving states can avoid giving them the refuge they seek.

Driven by this belief that African migrants are simply seeking better economic opportunities, a common solution to the migration "crisis" lies in generating higher levels of economic development within Africa. The European Union especially has struck a series of high-profile deals to provide billions of dollars to migrant-producing and host countries within the region in an effort to prevent migrants from finding their way north (Macdonald 2015; Bybee 2017). An underlying assumption is that migrants will stay home if there are more economic opportunities there. Besides downplaying obvious political motivations for migration, this assumption belies reality. Evidence suggests that economic growth actually leads to higher levels of outmigration (de Haas 2007, 2008), in part because people have more resources to pay for the costly journey. People who migrate to Europe especially are often well-educated and better off than their peers (de Haas 2008). The uptick in African migration to Europe over the past decade has coincided with a period of sustained growth in many African

countries; instead of preventing outmigration, development has increased the ability of Africans to move. Moreover, economic development does not ensure that host or transit countries in Africa will treat migrants from neighboring countries any better. Survey data show that people in wealthier African countries are more likely to oppose immigration (Whitaker & Giersch 2015), perhaps because they want to protect economic prosperity for themselves (Campbell 2003).

These findings from Africa raise doubts about the existing system by which wealthy countries essentially pay poorer countries to keep migrants within their respective regions. This is how the international refugee regime has operated for decades, with donor governments paying for the upkeep of tens of millions of refugees in Africa and Asia while agreeing to resettle only a tiny fraction (less than 0.5%) in Europe and North America. The system does little to address the root causes of migration or to prevent movement to other regions, but the focus on economic challenges is a convenient way for African governments to solicit money from donors. Host countries like Tanzania and Kenya, for example, have threatened periodically to close refugee camps due to funding shortages, often prompting renewed support (Whitaker 2008, 2016). Similarly, migrant-generating countries have highlighted their economic woes, both to attract international aid and to shirk responsibility for the political factors causing people to flee. Seeking to avoid further migration to their shores, the United States and European Union regularly provide the lion's share of funding for global refugee operations.

Like counterparts elsewhere, African leaders also portray migrants as a security threat. Although there are legitimate concerns in some contexts, the threat often is exaggerated. Many times, refugees themselves are less a source of insecurity than other actors in the conflict. In justifying its decision to close Somali refugee camps, for example, the Kenyan government emphasized the security threat posed by al-Shabaab (Whitaker 2016). Officials have produced no evidence to support claims that recent terrorist attacks in Kenya were planned by refugees in the Dadaab camp, but the climate of insecurity has been used to justify suspicion and harassment of all ethnic Somalis in the country (Balakian 2016).[7] In Tanzania, the simple presence of Rwandan refugees was perceived as a threat. The government's 1996 forced repatriation operation was prompted by fear that the Hutu-dominated camps would be attacked by Rwanda's Tutsi-led government, as happened in neighboring Congo (then Zaire) (Whitaker 1999, 2003a).

Empirical research does show that the risk of both domestic and international conflict increases with the presence of large numbers of refugees from neighboring states, but the overall chance of conflict is still very low (Salehyan 2007, 2008; Salehyan & Gleditsch 2006). The likelihood of conflict in such situations depends on several variables, including the political cohesion of the refugees (Lischer 2006) and the existing political context into which they enter (Whitaker 2003b). Furthermore, the slightly increased risk of conflict does not mean that refugees themselves are the perpetrators.

A recent study shows that refugee-hosting regions are more likely to be victims of attacks on civilians by governments and armed groups, especially when refugees are self-settled (Fisk 2016). These studies say nothing about any security risks associated with African refugees who resettle in other regions, but those are exceedingly low because of relatively small numbers and the rigorous vetting procedures they undergo.

Whether real or exaggerated, African leaders' claims about the security threat posed by migrants find a receptive domestic and international audience. In the context of multiparty competition, as discussed below, elected officials want to be seen as doing everything they can to address security concerns. Plans to close refugee camps in Kenya were announced just over a year before the 2017 general election, at a time when opposition politicians were staging frequent protests against corruption and other scandals. Shifting the rhetoric toward external security threats conveniently took the focus off domestic shortcomings. On the international stage, the language of security resonates well with donors, especially when migrants can be linked (however remotely) to terrorism. Since 2001 African governments have received millions of dollars from the United States and other Western donors for counterterrorism cooperation. Seeking to capitalize further on a common threat, leaders in countries such as Uganda and Nigeria have labeled opposition politicians as terrorists (Whitaker 2007). Given the new U.S. president's recent statements about the security threat posed by migrants, African leaders are likely to increase their own use of such language as they seek to garner favor and support from his administration.

The Politics of African Migration

With policymakers strategically highlighting economic and security concerns, political dynamics often are overlooked in journalistic and academic accounts of African migration. As we have seen, politics can be an important push factor causing people to leave their homes. Authoritarian governments stifle alternative viewpoints, foment fear, and thwart innovation, driving people to pursue opportunities elsewhere. A country like Rwanda has been free of widespread violence and experiencing rapid economic growth for two decades, but many of its citizens continue to reside in Kenya, Belgium, and beyond because of the repressive political climate at home. Despite this common pattern, donors like the United States have reduced funding in recent years for good governance and democracy programs, which are arguably just as important as those aimed at economic development (and possibly even more so).

Political dynamics also shape *responses* to African migration. Since the 1990s, increasing hostility toward migrants in many African countries has coincided with the spread of multiparty competition. The Kenyan plan to close refugee camps in the heat of an election season is not unique. In 1995, six months before its first multiparty general election, Tanzania closed its western border to prevent a further influx of refugees from

Rwanda and Burundi. In postapartheid South Africa, politicians frequently have used anti-immigrant rhetoric to garner support (Landau 2010; Mosselson 2010; Neocosmos 2010). The long-time ruling party in Cameroon has used the language of autochthony to undermine opposition candidates (Geschiere 2009). In Côte d'Ivoire, politicians facing multiparty competition developed the ultranationalist concept of *Ivoirité* to attract votes from key constituencies (Crook 1997; Mitchell 2011; Whitaker 2005), ultimately contributing to a violent conflict with citizens who were excluded from this identity and treated as foreigners. Even in Botswana, which has been held up (rightly or wrongly) as an example of multiparty democracy in Africa, hostility toward migrants has increased during a period when elections have become increasingly competitive (Poteete 2012).

Political liberalization in Africa thus has a dark underbelly. In the absence of strong ideological differences among parties, politicians often mobilize support by engaging in identity politics. In such situations, migrants and refugees can be a convenient scapegoat for complex problems such as crime, unemployment, and insecurity. In a recent analysis of survey data from eleven African countries (Whitaker & Giersch 2015), my co-author and I found that opposition to immigration is significantly higher in more democratic countries and when the survey is conducted closer to a national election. These findings suggest that the use of anti-immigrant rhetoric by politicians around election time legitimizes underlying hostility and fuels broader xenophobia. Democracy thus becomes a vehicle for the spread of illiberal ideas. This pattern does not hold true everywhere, though. In Ghana, for example, longstanding immigrant groups have taken advantage of citizenship laws and a competitive two-party system to constitute themselves as an important voting bloc (Kobo 2010), prompting politicians from both sides to actively compete for their support during election campaigns (Whitaker 2015).

The politicization of immigration and immigrants is not new, of course, and is not limited to emerging democracies in Africa. Anti-immigrant rhetoric has been part of the political landscape for decades in established democracies in Europe and North America. The rise of radical right parties in Europe has attracted considerable scholarly attention (Art 2011; Dahlström & Esaiasson 2013; Mudde 2014; Rydgren 2004, 2005), and immigration has long been used as a wedge issue in American politics (Jeong et al. 2011). The use of anti-immigrant rhetoric was on full display again in 2016 and 2017, during the "Brexit" campaign in the United Kingdom and the presidential elections in the United States and France. Building on research from outside the region, Africanists should continue to examine the ways in which democracy can generate illiberal outcomes, not just for migrants and refugees but for other marginalized groups as well.[8]

Finally, but often forgotten, politics play a role in how home countries interact with their citizens abroad. Global patterns of migration have created large African diaspora populations around the world. Millions of Nigerians, South Africans, and Kenyans live outside Africa, but emigration

is especially important for smaller countries such as Cape Verde, Mauritius, São Tomé and Príncipe, and Seychelles, which have more than 10 percent of their populations living abroad (Gonzalez-Garcia et al. 2016). These diaspora populations stay involved in their home countries, not just by providing billions of dollars in remittances, but also by participating in politics. About half of African governments now permit dual citizenship for their nationals living in other countries (Manby 2009), though the process of obtaining such rights often has been politicized (Whitaker 2011). African diasporas have been lobbying for the ability to participate in home country elections through overseas voting (Jaulin & Smith 2016), but partisan rivalries and debates surrounding the circumstances of migration have stalled their efforts in some cases (Wellman 2016; Whitaker & Inyanji 2016). As the number of migrants continues to increase, within Africa and beyond, more research is needed about prevailing political discourses on migration, the lived experiences of migrants and hosts, the perceived and real security implications of migration, and the political influence of diaspora populations.

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Notes

1. Increased private contributions were not nearly enough to make up for expected losses in federal government funds for refugee resettlement; the executive order capped resettlement at 50,000 refugees for the year, down from 110,000 projected by the Obama administration. In mid-February an evangelical humanitarian agency, World Relief, announced it would lay off 140 American staff members as a direct result of the executive order (Bailey 2017).

2. For a commentary on the overuse of water analogies (e.g., "migrant wave") in media coverage about migration, see Kainz (2016).

3. While the proportion leaving sub-Saharan Africa has increased over the past few decades, Africans still represent a smaller fraction of global migrants

relative to their portion of the world population than people from any other region (Gonzalez-Garcia et al. 2016).

4. In international law, the principle of non-refoulement forbids states from forcing refugees or asylum seekers to return to a country where they are at risk of persecution.

5. Israel is reportedly assisting the Kenyan government in its construction of a fence along the border with Somalia (Starkey & Carlstrom 2016).

6. Given the timing, his comments were taken as implicit criticism of Trump's executive order.

7. This suspicion is not new; for decades, Kenyan officials have portrayed ethnic Somalis as a security threat (Lochery 2012).

8. Political competition also has helped raise the salience of debates surrounding lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) individuals in Africa, for example (Grossman 2015).