Understanding Contemporary Sub-Saharan Africa

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Module Summary:

This module is intended to be a first approach to the study of Sub-Saharan Africa. It is taught in English.

Since the wave of independence swept through Sub-Saharan Africa in the 1960s, the states of the sub-continent have had to face massive challenges, ranging from nation-building and institutional consolidation to their integration into globalisation processes. In this perspective, the state comes out as a key element to understand issues pertaining to power relations, political change and economic development in Sub-Saharan Africa.

The module will begin with an overview of the colonial and postcolonial history of the sub-continent, which will set the basis for the study of power relations and state institutions in the aftermath of decolonisation. In this perspective, it will assess the weight of colonial legacy by enquiring into how newly independent states developed into structurally weak "gatekeeper" states, with "neo-patrimonial" political systems based on the appropriation, accumulation and redistribution of state resources as political patronage.

Following this background part, the module will move on to explore a number of topics: the state of democracy three decades after the wave of democratic transitions in the 1990s, conflicts and new transnational threats, economic and development issues and Sub-Saharan Africa's agency in international relations, using a number of Sub-Saharan African states as case studies or examples.

Objectives:

By the end of this module, students:

- will have gained background knowledge of the political theory of the state in Sub-Saharan Africa and will be able to analyse its main features
- should be able to identify the main structural challenges Sub-Saharan Africa states have been through since their creation against the backdrop of the evolution of the international system (sovereignty v. interdependence and dependence).
- should be able to understand how such structural weaknesses have affected Sub-Saharan African states' economic development and ability to control their territories and borders against transnational threats and external interventions
- should be able to assess the impact and limits of democratic transitions
- should be able to understand of how Sub-Saharan African states relate to each other and to the rest of the world politically and economically

Assessment:

- An oral presentation
- An MCQ test

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