

A REFERENCE FOR THE HISTORICALLY LITERATE READER

The Glossary of Empire

100 terms deployed by the West in relation to Africa and what they actually mean when translated from diplomatic language into historical fact.

100 ENTRIES 5 CATEGORIES COMPILED 2025

SEARCH

Filter by term or definition

ALL

POLITICAL

ECONOMIC

MILITARY

CULTURAL

INSTITUTIONAL

SHOWING 100 OF 100 ENTRIES

001

Stable

POLITICAL

STATED: *peaceful, governed, orderly*

Resources are flowing to Western interests without interruption. Contracts are honoured, oil is exported, debt is serviced. Has nothing to do with whether the population is fed, safe, or free.

002 Democracy

POLITICAL

STATED: *free elections, rule of law, civil liberties*

A governance arrangement compatible with Western capital. Celebrated when the right candidate wins. Ignored or reversed when the wrong one does. See: Gaza 2006, Algeria 1991, Zimbabwe 2008.

003 Dictator

POLITICAL

STATED: *authoritarian ruler who oppresses his people*

A leader who has stopped cooperating with Western extraction. Yesterday's partner, today's tyrant. Applied selectively "never to friendly autocrats.

004 Failed State

POLITICAL

STATED: *a government unable to provide basic services*

A country whose government can no longer protect Western business interests or honour extraction agreements. Somalia after rejecting IMF terms. Libya after Gaddafi's removal.

005 Humanitarian Crisis

POLITICAL

STATED: *mass suffering requiring urgent intervention*

A disruption to the resource supply chain severe enough to justify military or NGO entry. Rarely invoked with equal urgency in resource-poor crisis zones.

006 Regime Change

POLITICAL

STATED: *the democratic will of the people prevailing*

A Western-managed transition of power to install a more compliant government. Sometimes via elections, sometimes via coup, sometimes via sanctions-induced collapse.

007 Reform

ECONOMIC

STATED: *modernising, improving governance and efficiency*

Structural adjustment: privatise state assets, cut subsidies, open markets to foreign capital, and prioritise debt repayment over public spending. Always prescribed, never chosen.

008 Good Governance

POLITICAL

STATED: *transparency, accountability, rule of law*

Governance that enables foreign companies to operate freely, contracts to be enforced in Western courts, and profits to be repatriated without friction.

009 Ungoverned Space

MILITARY

STATED: *territory outside state control, a security vacuum*

Territory where Western extraction infrastructure cannot be defended. The 'governance gap' is a problem only because it is an access problem.

010 Civil Society

INSTITUTIONAL

STATED: *grassroots organisations representing citizens*

A network of Western-funded NGOs that creates a parallel governance layer accountable to donors rather than citizens. Used to apply pressure on non-compliant governments.

011 Development Aid

ECONOMIC

STATED: *generous assistance to lift people out of poverty*

Tied funding that opens markets, funds consultants from donor countries, and

creates debt dependencies. Often returns more money to donor nations than it delivers.

012 **Emerging Market**

ECONOMIC

STATED: *a fast-growing economy with opportunity*

A country whose middle class is large enough to sell to, whose labour is cheap enough to exploit, and whose regulations are loose enough to extract from without resistance.

013 **Security Partnership**

MILITARY

STATED: *mutual defence cooperation between allies*

Military basing rights and intelligence access in exchange for diplomatic cover. The host nation provides the territory; the partner extracts the resources and manages the political class.

014 **Peacekeeping**

MILITARY

STATED: *neutral forces maintaining ceasefire and protecting civilians*

Armed Western presence in a conflict zone, often extending the conflict by picking sides, protecting key infrastructure, and enabling a particular faction's control.

015 **Sanctions**

POLITICAL

STATED: *targeted pressure to change government behaviour*

Economic siege warfare against populations to punish leaders who refused Western demands. The leaders typically survive; the people do not.

016 **Free Trade Agreement**

ECONOMIC

STATED: *mutual access to each other's markets*

Asymmetric market opening in which African industries “without comparable capital, infrastructure, or subsidies” compete directly with Western corporations and lose.

017

Investment Climate

ECONOMIC

STATED: *conditions for business growth and entrepreneurship*

How easily foreign capital can enter, operate, and exit a country. A 'poor investment climate' often means a government is trying to keep more of its own resources.

018

Corruption

POLITICAL

STATED: *abuse of public office for private gain*

Applied selectively to African leaders who divert funds from Western interests. Rarely applied to Western banks that launder those same funds or corporations that pay the bribes.

019

Transparency

INSTITUTIONAL

STATED: *open government, accountability to citizens*

The requirement that African states open their books to Western creditors, donors, and rating agencies “while Western tax havens holding African elite wealth remain opaque.

020

Accountability

INSTITUTIONAL

STATED: *consequences for wrongdoing*

African leaders face ICC prosecutions. Western leaders who orchestrated illegal wars, coups, and resource extraction face book deals.

021 Rule of Law

POLITICAL

STATED: *equal application of law to all citizens*

A legal framework that protects foreign property rights and investment, enforces contracts in Western-friendly courts, and criminalises anything that threatens capital flows.

022 International Community

POLITICAL

STATED: *the collective voice of the world's nations*

The US, EU, and their closest allies. A rhetorical device that converts Western preferences into a universal mandate. Africa, Asia, and Latin America are rarely consulted.

023 Capacity Building

INSTITUTIONAL

STATED: *training local institutions to govern themselves better*

Creating dependency on Western technical assistance, consultants, and training programmes — ensuring that expertise and decision-making power remain externally anchored.

024 Fragile State

POLITICAL

STATED: *a government at risk of collapse*

A country where Western leverage is eroding and an alternative power arrangement — one less friendly to Western interests — is possible.

025 Extremism

POLITICAL

STATED: *violent ideological movements threatening peace*

Armed resistance to Western-backed governments or resource extraction.

'Terrorism' when it strikes Western interests. 'Instability' when it only harms locals.

026 **Counter-terrorism** MILITARY

STATED: *fighting violent non-state actors*

Military operations that eliminate threats to Western-backed regimes and resource corridors. Often produces more recruits for the movements it targets.

027 **Nation Building** POLITICAL

STATED: *helping a post-conflict country rebuild its institutions*

Reconstructing a country's governance architecture in the image of Western interests, typically after Western-sponsored destruction of the previous one.

028 **Modernisation** CULTURAL

STATED: *progress toward developed-world standards*

Adoption of Western cultural, economic, and institutional frameworks. Traditional governance systems, communal land tenure, and indigenous economies are 'pre-modern' and must be replaced.

029 **Human Rights** POLITICAL

STATED: *universal protections for all people*

Selectively applied. Invoked loudly against non-aligned governments. Quietly set aside for Saudi Arabia, Israel, Egypt, and other strategic partners.

030 **Civilised** CULTURAL

STATED: *adherent to universal standards of decency*

Compliant with Western norms, deferential to Western institutions, and willing to

surrender sovereignty in exchange for legitimacy. The uncivilised are those who refuse.

031 **Developing World**

CULTURAL

STATED: *nations on a developmental trajectory toward prosperity*

Countries being kept in a permanent state of resource provision for industrialised economies. Development is the destination perpetually held just out of reach.

032 **Debt Relief**

ECONOMIC

STATED: *compassionate cancellation of unpayable debts*

Strategic write-offs that come with new conditionalities, generating new debts and new dependencies. The country loses ownership of assets; the creditor gains strategic leverage.

033 **Structural Adjustment**

ECONOMIC

STATED: *correcting macroeconomic imbalances*

IMF-mandated removal of food subsidies, healthcare spending, and import barriers followed by currency devaluation and austerity in exchange for loan rollovers.

034 **Private Sector Development**

ECONOMIC

STATED: *fostering entrepreneurship and economic growth*

Opening African economies to foreign corporations under the premise that local business cannot develop on its own. The private sector being developed is usually foreign.

035 **Neutral**

POLITICAL

STATED: *impartial, not taking sides*

Aligned with Western interests. A neutral observer, neutral mediator, or neutral institution is one that accepts the Western framing of a conflict and its preferred resolution.

036 **Legitimate**

POLITICAL

STATED: *recognised as having valid authority*

Recognised by Western capitals. Governments that win elections but refuse Western terms are 'illegitimate.' Governments installed by coups but friendly to Western interests are 'transitional authorities.'

037 **Rogue State**

POLITICAL

STATED: *a state that violates international norms*

A state that refuses Western dominance, prices its resources in non-dollar currencies, or builds relationships with China, Russia, or other rival powers.

038 **Propaganda**

CULTURAL

STATED: *deliberate manipulation of information*

Any narrative from an African government or non-Western source that contradicts the Western version of events. Western disinformation campaigns are 'strategic communication.'

039 **Post-conflict Reconstruction**

INSTITUTIONAL

STATED: *rebuilding after war*

The period in which a destroyed country is redesigned from the outside — its constitution, courts, and economic policy written by Western advisors before

sovereignty is ceremonially returned.

040 **Land Reform** ECONOMIC

STATED: *equitable redistribution of land*

When proposed by African governments, a threat to foreign property rights requiring sanctions and isolation. When imposed by colonial settlers, historical fact not open to reversal.

041 **Strategic Interest** POLITICAL

STATED: *matters of national security importance*

Where the resources are. 'Strategic' is the adjective that converts extraction into policy and intervention into necessity.

042 **Soft Power** CULTURAL

STATED: *influence through culture, diplomacy, and values*

Western media, education systems, NGOs, and cultural exports that shape how African elites think, what they aspire to, and whose frameworks they use to govern.

043 **Peacebuilding** INSTITUTIONAL

STATED: *long-term work toward sustainable peace*

A prolonged Western presence that reconstructs conflict-affected societies in ways that protect access to resources, debt repayment, and strategic basing arrangements.

044 **Universal Values** CULTURAL

STATED: *values shared by all of humanity*

Western liberal values, presented as the evolutionary endpoint of all human societies. Deviation from them is framed as civilisational failure.

045 **Multilateralism**

INSTITUTIONAL

STATED: *global cooperation through international institutions*

A framework dominated by Western voting blocs, Western-headquartered institutions, and Western-appointed leadership “ through which Western preferences become international law.

046 **Conditionality**

ECONOMIC

STATED: *ensuring aid is used effectively*

The clause in every loan and aid package that transfers decision-making power from the recipient government to the creditor. Sovereignty is the collateral.

047 **Technical Assistance**

INSTITUTIONAL

STATED: *expert support to build local capability*

Western consultants, advisors, and embedded personnel who ensure that donor country priorities “ not local ones “ shape policy outcomes. Expertise as control.

048 **Civil Conflict**

POLITICAL

STATED: *internal violence between groups*

Often externally fuelled by Western arms sales, proxy support for opposition forces, and economic pressure that radicalises populations. Then blamed on 'ethnic tensions' or 'tribalism.'

049 Tribalism

CULTURAL

STATED: *primitive ethnic loyalty that prevents national unity*

The West's preferred explanation for African political violence â€” one that erases colonial boundary-drawing, resource competition, and decades of divide-and-rule politics from the analysis.

050 Overpopulation

CULTURAL

STATED: *too many people relative to available resources*

A framing that blames African poverty on African people rather than on resource extraction, debt structures, and trade regimes. Population is the problem; not the drain.

051 Brain Drain

CULTURAL

STATED: *the loss of skilled professionals to richer countries*

A resource extraction that Western countries benefit from directly â€” importing trained doctors, engineers, and scientists whom African states paid to educate. The training subsidy flows one way.

052 Foreign Direct Investment

ECONOMIC

STATED: *capital inflows that boost growth and employment*

Corporate entry into African markets that extracts raw materials, repatriates profits, employs minimal local labour in skilled roles, and often degrades the surrounding environment.

053 Currency Stabilisation

ECONOMIC

STATED: *reducing inflation and building monetary confidence*

Pegging African currencies to the dollar or euro, or placing monetary policy under

external supervision “ensuring that exchange rates favour Western importers and investors.

054 **Market Liberalisation**

ECONOMIC

STATED: *freeing markets from government interference*

Removing protections for African industries so that better-capitalised Western corporations can enter and dominate. African farmers lose subsidies; Western agricultural exports keep theirs.

055 **Bilateral Aid**

ECONOMIC

STATED: *direct government-to-government assistance*

Transfers that come with political conditions, procurement requirements from the donor country, and reporting obligations that cost more to fulfil than the aid is worth.

056 **International Law**

INSTITUTIONAL

STATED: *binding rules governing relations between states*

Rules written by Western powers during their period of dominance. Applied rigorously to African states, selectively to Western ones, and barely at all to Western corporations operating in Africa.

057 **Sovereignty**

POLITICAL

STATED: *the right of states to govern themselves*

Respected when the country in question is an ally. Violated through covert operations, proxy wars, economic pressure, and debt when it is not “and retroactively justified by 'responsibility to protect.'

058 Resource Curse

ECONOMIC

STATED: *the paradox of resource-rich nations remaining poor*

A depoliticised framing that naturalises the theft of African resources. The 'curse' is not the resources " it is the system of extraction, debt, and compliant elite formation built around them.

059 Governance Deficit

INSTITUTIONAL

STATED: *weak institutions failing citizens*

A diagnostic that locates the problem inside Africa and never examines how external actors have systematically undermined African institutions, assassinated competent leaders, and rewarded compliance over capability.

060 Diaspora Engagement

CULTURAL

STATED: *connecting emigrants to their home countries*

A channel through which Western governments influence African domestic politics via diaspora communities, remittance leverage, and dual-citizen political figures groomed abroad.

061 Geopolitical Instability

POLITICAL

STATED: *dangerous uncertainty in a region's political order*

A country is considering a relationship with China, Russia, or another rival power. Instability arrives the moment the phone calls to Washington stop being returned.

062 Genocide Prevention

MILITARY

STATED: *protecting civilian populations from mass atrocity*

Selectively invoked. Deployed when intervention serves strategic interests. Absent when it does not " as in Rwanda 1994, Biafra, or Western Sahara.

063 **Intellectual Property** ECONOMIC

STATED: *protecting innovation and creativity*

A Western-designed system that allows pharmaceutical, agricultural, and technology corporations to charge African countries for accessing knowledge built partly on African resources and labour.

064 **Climate Finance** ECONOMIC

STATED: *supporting poor nations to adapt to climate change*

Loans “not grants” extended to countries that contributed least to global emissions. The polluters collect interest on the adaptation of the polluted.

065 **Population Control** CULTURAL

STATED: *family planning and reproductive health services*

A programme, often Western-funded, that targets African birth rates rather than African consumption deficits or wealth extraction. The problem is bodies, not the system.

066 **Proxy War** MILITARY

STATED: *a conflict involving external actors supporting local factions*

A war fought between African groups on behalf of Western “or rival” power interests. The continent absorbs the casualties; the patrons absorb the strategic gains.

067 **Arms Sales** MILITARY

STATED: *legal commerce in military hardware to allied states*

The mechanism by which Western defence industries profit from African conflict

The mechanism by which western defence industries profit from African conflict. The weapons sold to one faction this decade will be used against Western-backed forces the next.

068 **Remittances**

ECONOMIC

STATED: *money sent home by migrants to support families*

Private capital flows that subsidise the failure of Western aid and investment policy “ while international transfer companies extract 8–12% in fees from the world's most financially vulnerable.

069 **Tax Base Erosion**

ECONOMIC

STATED: *governments losing revenue due to poor tax systems*

What happens when multinational corporations use transfer pricing, thin capitalisation, and treaty networks “ often designed by Western advisors “ to strip African economies of taxable income.

070 **Counter-insurgency**

MILITARY

STATED: *military strategy to defeat armed rebel groups*

Suppression of armed resistance to Western-backed governments, typically by training and equipping state forces whose human rights abuses are diplomatically overlooked in exchange for stability.

071 **Deradicalization**

CULTURAL

STATED: *programmes to rehabilitate violent extremists*

The ideological component of counter-insurgency. Designed to reframe grievances “ resource dispossession, occupation, elite corruption “ as psychological disorders requiring treatment rather than political problems requiring redress.

072 **Strategic Partnership** POLITICAL

STATED: *a relationship of mutual benefit between states*

A formal arrangement in which an African state provides basing rights, resource access, or intelligence in exchange for diplomatic protection, military training, and regime security guarantees.

073 **Offshore Finance** ECONOMIC

STATED: *international financial services and banking*

The system â€” largely Western-operated â€” that allows African elites to park stolen wealth in London, Geneva, and Paris, and that allows corporations to route profits out of Africa tax-free.

074 **Developmental State** POLITICAL

STATED: *a government actively directing economic growth*

Acceptable when South Korea or Singapore does it. Called 'state interference' or 'socialism' when an African government tries the same industrial policy.

075 **Freedom of the Press** POLITICAL

STATED: *the right of journalists to report without interference*

Invoked when African governments restrict Western-owned or Western-funded media. Not invoked when Western governments jail Julian Assange or pressure African states to ban Chinese media.

076 **Democratic Backsliding** POLITICAL

STATED: *the erosion of democratic norms by governments*

A country moving away from Western-friendly governance. Not applied to Saudi

Arabia, Rwanda, or other allies where elections are non-existent or performative.

077 **Elections Monitoring** INSTITUTIONAL

STATED: *independent observation to ensure free and fair elections*

A legitimization process that Western organisations control. Favourable results are certified as fair. Unfavourable results trigger 'concerns' and calls for recounts " or regime change.

078 **Inclusive Growth** ECONOMIC

STATED: *economic expansion that benefits everyone*

A rhetorical upgrade to structural adjustment language that adds equity vocabulary without changing the underlying policy " open markets, privatisation, and debt servicing.

079 **Pan-African** CULTURAL

STATED: *the movement for African unity and solidarity*

Treated as aspirational rhetoric when harmless, and a security threat when it produces actual institutions, currencies, or trade blocs that could reduce African dependency on Western financial systems.

080 **Institutional Weakness** INSTITUTIONAL

STATED: *underdeveloped government agencies and courts*

Often a product of colonial administrative design, structural adjustment cuts, and the deliberate elimination of capable independent leaders " but described as an innate African failing.

081 **Illegal Mining** ECONOMIC

STATED: *unauthorised extraction violating national law*

Applied to informal African miners. Western mining corporations with government contracts extracting under comparable conditions and externalising environmental costs are 'operating legally.'

082 **Environmental Sustainability** CULTURAL

STATED: *protecting ecosystems for future generations*

Demanded of African governments resisting extraction, and ignored when Western corporations conduct it. Carbon credits are designed so rich nations can keep polluting while paying African nations not to develop.

083 **Cultural Heritage** CULTURAL

STATED: *preserving the historical and artistic legacy of peoples*

Discussed warmly in relation to African art " most of which sits in European museums acquired through conquest, trade coercion, or outright theft " while repatriation requests are managed slowly and minimally.

084 **Diaspora Investment** ECONOMIC

STATED: *remittances and capital from Africans abroad supporting home development*

Increasingly used as a substitute for development aid that no longer arrives " transferring the burden of African development from Western policy failures onto individual African migrants.

085 **Debt Sustainability** ECONOMIC

STATED: *ensuring a country can service its debt over time*

A framework managed by the IMF and World Bank that determines how much a

country can borrow and on what terms. Sustainability is assessed by the creditor, for the creditor.

086 **Free and Fair Elections**

POLITICAL

STATED: *elections conducted without intimidation or fraud*

Elections whose outcome is acceptable to Western governments. When outcomes are not acceptable, the elections are retrospectively found to have had 'serious irregularities.'

087 **Population Displacement**

CULTURAL

STATED: *people forced from their homes by conflict or disaster*

Often a predictable consequence of structural adjustment, resource conflict, or Western-backed military operations. Treated as a natural disaster requiring aid rather than a political product requiring accountability.

088 **Military Intervention**

MILITARY

STATED: *the use of force to protect civilians or restore order*

The hard end of regime change. Applied when economic and political pressure fail to dislodge a non-compliant government. Retrospectively dressed in humanitarian language.

089 **Food Security**

ECONOMIC

STATED: *ensuring populations have reliable access to nutrition*

Perpetually discussed; never addressed through structural change. African food systems are made insecure by cash-crop dependency “ a colonial inheritance ” and subsidised Western agricultural imports.

090 Poverty Reduction

ECONOMIC

STATED: *programmes to lift people out of destitution*

The stated purpose of nearly every Western-designed African economic programme. Poverty has declined least in countries most subject to structural adjustment, and most in countries that ignored Western prescriptions.

091 Natural Resources

ECONOMIC

STATED: *the raw materials a country possesses*

The actual subject of most Western policy toward Africa. When a document says 'natural resources,' read: what we need, where it is, and how we keep access to it.

092 Geopolitical Competition

POLITICAL

STATED: *rivalry between major powers for influence*

The new framing for Africa's centrality. China's infrastructure investment is 'debt trap diplomacy'; Western extraction arrangements built over centuries are 'partnerships' and 'historical ties.'

093 Nationalisation

ECONOMIC

STATED: *government ownership of strategic industries*

The most reliable trigger for Western hostility. When an African government takes ownership of its own oil, minerals, or land, it becomes a 'rogue state' almost immediately.

094 Coup

POLITICAL

STATED: *an illegal seizure of government power*

Condemned when it ousts a Western-aligned government. Described as a 'transition'

or managed with diplomatic silence when it installs one. The legality is secondary to the alignment.

095 **African Solutions for African Problems** CULTURAL

STATED: *respecting African agency in resolving African conflicts*

Deployed most often when Western powers do not want to commit resources. African agency is respected precisely when the problem is expensive, complex, or strategically unimportant.

096 **Responsibility to Protect (R2P)** MILITARY

STATED: *the international obligation to prevent mass atrocities*

A doctrine that converts sovereignty from a shield into a conditional grant. African states that fail to 'protect' their citizens " by Western definition " lose the right to resist Western intervention.

097 **Foreign Policy Independence** POLITICAL

STATED: *a nation's right to chart its own diplomatic course*

Tolerated in principle. In practice, African states that exercise it " by joining non-alignment movements, engaging China, or leaving the CFA franc zone " face diplomatic and economic consequences.

098 **Sustainable Development Goals** INSTITUTIONAL

STATED: *a global framework for equitable development by 2030*

A set of aspirational targets that generate reporting requirements for African governments while placing no binding obligations on the Western states and corporations that shape the conditions for their failure.

099

African Renaissance

CULTURAL

STATED: *the cultural, political, and economic revival of Africa*

Welcomed rhetorically when it means Afrobeats, fashion, and tech innovation.
Resisted materially when it means African monetary sovereignty, industrialisation policy, or reduced debt dependence.

100

Partnership

POLITICAL

STATED: *a relationship of mutual benefit and shared goals*

The word used when 'extraction' would be too honest. A partnership in which one party owns the resources, the other owns the capital and the contracts, and neither pretends the terms are equal.

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AND THE MISSIONARIES HAD THE BIBLE.
THEY TAUGHT US TO PRAY WITH OUR EYES CLOSED.
WHEN WE OPENED THEM, THEY HAD THE LAND AND WE HAD THE BIBLE."
" ATTRIBUTED TO JOMO KENYATTA