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Korean lesson for Africa

In a brilliant [op ed](#), prof Salvatore Babones argued that Poland should the South Korean model to become an affluent society. In some ways, prof. Babones turns Marx upside down. For Marx the economy was structural, politics was super-structural. For prof. Babones, the opposite seems to be true. The government should fix society, economic success will follow.

Prof. Babones seems to reduce Japan's presence in (South) Korea to colonization, rape, murder, and cultural genocide.

The South Korean case has extensively been investigated by political economists. It was one of the best known cases of a developmental state -a state that, by making the right choices, is able to create the conditions for socio-economic development.

In one of the best studies on this issue Atul Kohli (1994) noted that “While many scholars have sought to analyze South Korea's economic success, not enough attention has been paid to the impact of Japanese colonialism. Japanese colonial influence on Korea in 1905–1945, while brutal and humiliating, was also decisive in shaping a political economy that later evolved into the high-growth South Korean path to development”.

Yes, Japanese colonization was brutal but it also planted the seeds for South Korea's success. One of which was represented by the fact that Japanese colonial authorities built an efficient bureaucracy, that combined capacity and autonomy, that was

decentralized and yet highly accountable to the central government. In other words, well before Samuel Huntington (1968) started praising the virtue of having an effective government and before the World Bank understood, in the words of one of its former employees, that good governance matters, the Japanese colonial authorities had already grasped that lesson and acted upon it.

The wisdom of the Japanese colonial administration does not diminish in any way the horrors of colonialism and colonization, but it allows one to understand why South Korea, upon regaining its independence, was able to become one the best performing economies in the world, while other countries, in their post-colonial phase, were unable to do so.

Robert Bates, in one of the most remarkable books of the past 40 years, made clear that the economic troubles that many African nations experienced, once independent, were to a large extent due to the fact or explained by the fact that African states lacked that type of (Weberian) bureaucracy that played such a considerable role in securing South Korea's economic success.

Building effective, autonomous but responsive, bureaucracies is what states need to do to create the conditions for real and sustained economic success. This is what Africa needs to do to enjoy greater prosperity and one can only hope that African leaders will not forget such an important lesson.

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