Negotiating African Independence: An Introduction

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This special issue of *International Negotiations* is inspired by the need to revisit the epic bargaining processes that gave birth to African independence since the 1960s. The negotiations between the outgoing European colonial powers and various African nationalist leaders provide rich empirical studies for advancing understanding of negotiations. To gain insight into the processes and consequences of colonial bargaining, we compare a number of countries—Angola, Ghana, Mauritius, Malawi, Zambia, and the Western Sahara.1 Except for Western Sahara, all the countries attained independence after negotiations with the colonial powers, and these negotiations proved highly significant in shaping subsequent relations between ethnic, religious, regional, and class interests.

Colonial negotiations were encounters in which the colonial powers and African nationalists sought to make new rules that were embodied in constitutional arrangements. Where these constitutions endured, they structured the future rules of interaction between the state and the society. For African elites, these constitutional bargains were grand compromises that afforded them the legitimacy to govern. At the same time, the bargains gravely tied the hands of the nationalists in overcoming some of the colonial inequities.

In each of the countries, our contributors have examined the bargaining process, issues, actors, and consequences of the negotiations leading to independence. In all these cases, a number of questions afforded a comparative perspective:

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• What circumstances led to the colonial bargains?
• What was the role of third-party actors, especially mediators, in forging compromises among the negotiators?
• To what extent did colonial bargains structure Africa’s inter-ethnic relations over the post-colonial period?
• Under what conditions did colonial bargaining contribute to divided institutions that fragmented the society and contributed to subsequent conflicts and violence?
• How was colonial bargaining comparable to and distinct from other types of negotiating encounters?

These questions capture the complexities that characterized colonial bargaining, most of which involved multiple parties in different but overlapping phases. Despite the many similarities among the bargaining processes, there were a number of distinctive aspects. The differences in styles and contexts of bargains reflected the variations among the colonial powers, their preparedness to relinquish power, the nature of the stakes, and the relationships among African nationalists. In most of the pre-independence dialogues, the colonial authorities and African bargainers negotiated at two primary levels: colonial officials negotiated with resident European interests and their home offices, and Africans negotiated among themselves as well as with the colonial authorities. Owen Kalinga’s article presents the Central African Federation as an institution that added a layer of complexity to the negotiations for the independence of Malawi and Zambia: negotiations revolved around the decolonization of constituent members of the Federation, thereby inviting the ire of resident colonial interests with a stake in the Federation. In the end, the politics of decolonization led to the abrogation of the Federation.

Very rarely were pre-independence negotiations one-time, roundtable events. Rather, most of them emerged from incremental processes of institution building. Even in the unique case of the Alvor Conference on Angolan decolonization in January 1975, the negotiations were often preceded by significant consultations among the various parties to the conflict. Shaheen Mozaffar argues that in Mauritius, the independence negotiations of the 1960s merely completed a process of incremental development of tutelary democracy that the colonial authorities had embarked upon since the early 1900s. Similarly, Donald Rothchild treats the negotiations in the mid-1950s for Ghana’s independence as cumulative steps that began with Kwame Nkrumah’s sweeping pre-independence victory in the 1951 elections.

Most pre-independence negotiations were intractable because of clashes of interests within and between bargaining coalitions. In some cases, the pre-independence negotiations solidified ethnic blocs such as the Ashanti-based