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CHAPTER

8 Political Geography

Field Note Independence Is Better Than Servitude

I arrived in Ghana just after an assassination attempt on the country's first president, Kwame Nkrumah. As I drove through the capital city of Accra in 1962, I stopped short when I saw a statue of President Nkrumah in the middle of the street. I have seen plenty of statues of leaders in my travels, but this one was unique. Ghanians had dressed their hospital-ridden president in a hospital gown and bandaged his head!

I stopped the car to take a picture (Fig. 8.1), and I read the proclamations on Nkrumah's statue. Written in English, they said, "To me the liberation of Ghana will be meaningless unless it is linked up with the liberation of Africa" and "We prefer self-government with danger to servitude in tranquility."

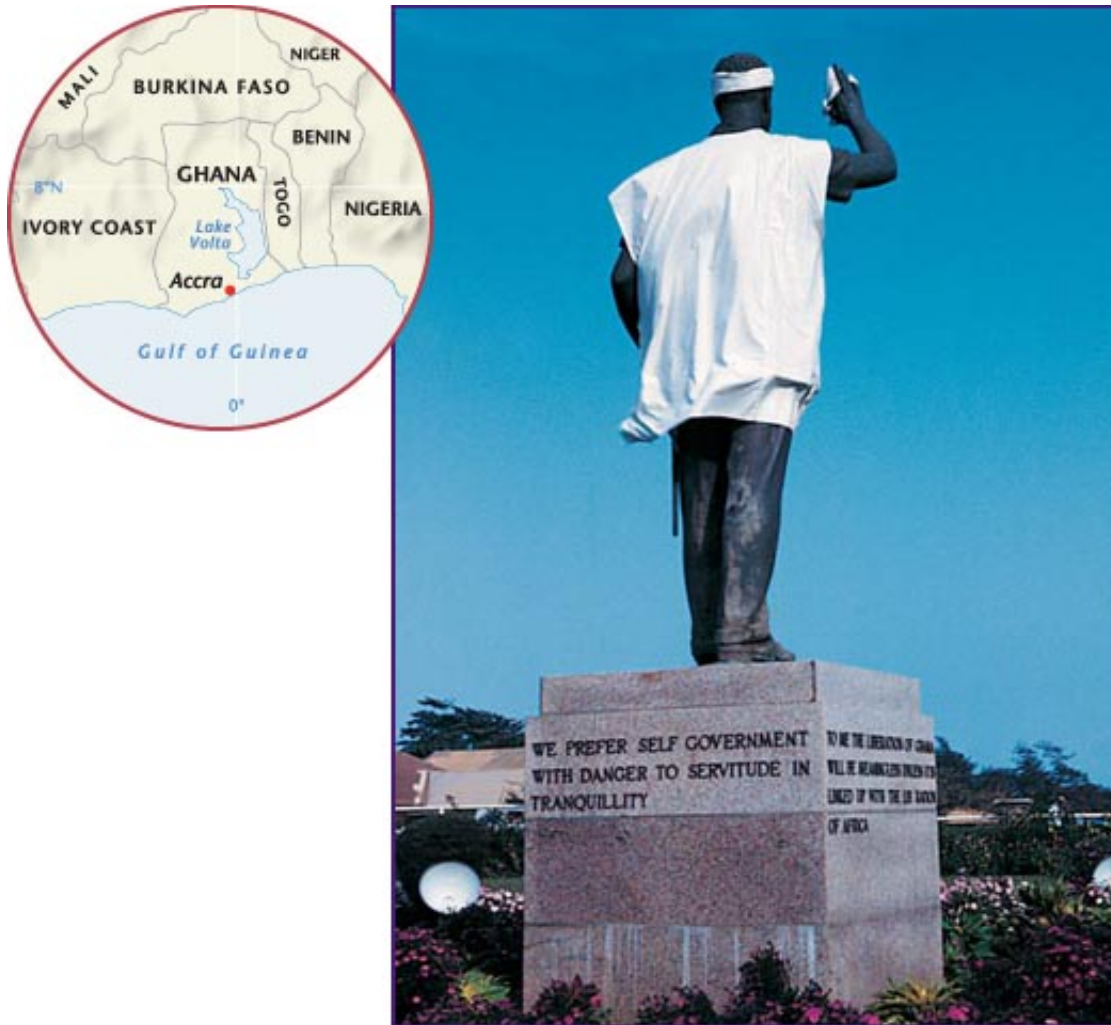


Figure 8.1 Accra, Ghana.

Statue of Kwame Nkrumah, the first president of Ghana. © H. J. de Blij.

Ghana, the first Subsaharan African colony to become independent, gained its independence in 1960. A wave of decolonization swept through Africa in the 1960s (Fig. 8.2)—fueled by the hope that decolonization would bring political and economic independence. But decolonization did not eliminate political and economic problems for Africa. Former colonies became states, reaching political independence under international law; each new country was now sovereign, legally having the ultimate say over what happened within the borders. New political problems arose within the formally independent countries. Each had to deal with a mixture of peoples, cultures, languages, and religions that were grouped within single political units during the colonial period. They had to try to adapt colonial social and political structures to the needs of the newly independent states. Economically, the new countries found themselves fully intertwined in the world economy, unable to control fundamental elements of their own economies.

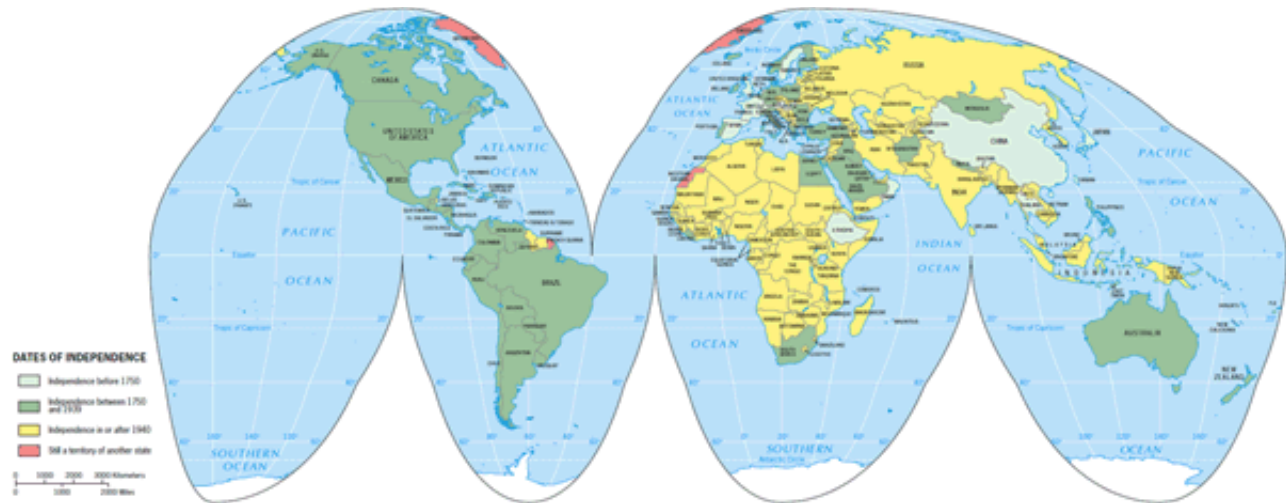


Figure 8.2 Dates of Independence for States, throughout the World.

The first major wave of independence movements between 1750 and 1939 occurred mainly in the Americas. The second major wave of independence movements after 1940 occurred mainly in Africa and Asia. South Sudan became the most recently recognized independent state in July 2011, bringing the total number of member states in the United Nations to 193. *Data from: United Nations, 2011.*

For many of the new African states, Nkrumah's words rang true—independence was better than servitude, even if it meant danger instead of tranquility. Nkrumah, elected in 1960, was overthrown by the military in 1966 and died in exile in 1972.

The story of Ghana and President Nkrumah is a familiar one. After decades of European colonial rule, peoples around the world sought independence; they wanted to have their own country, and they wanted to have a voice in what happened in their country. Nkrumah knew the risk was great—danger came with the quick transition and from the inheritance of a political organization that made little sense for Ghana or the people who lived there. European colonialism organized the world as a huge functional region controlled from Europe and designed to serve Europe's economic and political interests. Colonialism also brought the European way of politically organizing space into states to the rest of the world. This system and its lack of fit for most of the world has caused political strife, and yet, peoples still seek to become independent countries.

Political activity is as basic to human culture as language or religion. All individuals, groups, communities, nations, governments, and supranational organizations engage in political activity. Each desires power and influence to achieve personal and public goals. Whether or not we like politics, each of us is caught up in these processes, with effects ranging from the composition of school boards to the conduct of war.

In this chapter, we examine how geographers study politics, the domain of political geography. Like all fields of geography (and the social sciences, more generally), political geographers used to spend a lot of time explaining why the world is the way it is and trying to predict or prescribe the future. Today, political geographers spend much more time trying to understand the spatial assumptions and structures underlying politics, the ways people organize space, the role territory plays in politics, and the problems that result from changing political and territorial circumstances.

Key Questions For Chapter 8

1. How is space politically organized into states and nations?
2. How do states spatially organize their governments?
3. How are boundaries established, and why do boundary disputes occur?
4. How does the study of geopolitics help us understand the world?

5. What are supranational organizations, and what is the future of the state?

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