

Book review

Violence in African Elections: Between Democracy and Big Man Politics. Edited by Mimmi Söderberg Kovacs and Jesper Bjarnesen. Uppsala, London: Zed Books, 2018, pp. 273.

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Since the end of the Cold War, holding periodic elections has emerged as the dominant mechanism of distribution of political powers. As political power means reliable access to state resources in many African countries, the stakes in elections are exceedingly high. As a result, political elites mobilize and deploy actors and strategies including electoral violence to win elections. The edited volume entitled *Violence in African Elections: Between Democracy and Big Man Politics* is a vital contribution to understanding electoral violence in Africa. The overall objective of the volume is to explain “when and where we see electoral violence in Africa’s emerging democracies”, and more importantly “to empirically trace the processes through which such events occur” (p.4). Through eleven case studies drawn from nine countries (Kenya and Nigeria two cases each, Uganda, Côte d'Ivoire, Burundi, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Zimbabwe and Ghana), the volume presents in-depth arguments as to how micro-level factors and local actors give rise to electoral violence and how they are related to political elites and institutions at the national level. A well-written introduction by Mimmi Söderberg Kovacs, a senior researcher at Uppsala University and Nordic Africa Institute, sets the stage for the succeeding eleven case studies, while the conclusion knits them together well.

The first chapter provides a macro-level case study on Kenya that traces back the underlying causes of electoral violence to the history of real or perceived injustices and victimization by identity-based networks. The authors argue that “elite strategies to mobilize people on divisive ethnic issues in order to secure political and economic resources in the pre-democratic era pave the way for violent political mobilization when competitive multiparty elections are instituted” (pp. 29-30). The history of Big Man politics in Kenya began during the presidency of Jomo Kenyatta, the first leader of the Republic of Kenya, who favored elites from his Kikuyu ethnic group and other affiliated minority groups while marginalizing elites from major ethnic groups like Luo. His successor, Moi, did the same by favoring elites from his Kalenjin ethnic group and affiliated minorities while alienating and victimizing other identity groups including the Kikuyu. This exclusionary identity-based political system led to ethnic-based political mobilization when multiparty elections were introduced. This resulted in identity-based mass voting and electoral violence in 1992 and 2007. In this otherwise well-argued account, the authors did not account for the legacy of colonialism and the problematic restructuring of the Kenyan state which was implemented in a manner that increased identity politics and risk of conflict.

The micro-level approach cases, chapters three to eleven, link the drivers of electoral-related violence to political elites’ strategies of deploying local non-state actors to secure electoral votes in exchange for the distribution of private goods and access to state resources. Informal criminal networks like Chipangano in Zimbabwe and Mungiki in Kenya recruited and employed

desperate youth to win elections for political employers who pay gangs through access to the state resources and impunity from prosecution for their role in election-related violence. Similarly, post-war rebel networks in Liberia, ex-militants in Niger Delta and local gang networks in Sierra Leone weaponized their combat experience to secure votes for their patrons while thwarting the chance of opposing parties in exchange for power and access to state resources. What makes ex-militants unique is their capacity to take initiative and help central political elites win the election for subsequent recognitions and rewards.

Another interesting case study in Nigeria shows the interplay of election-related violence and Big Man politics in the transportation sector of Lagos. Here, a legal association called the National Union of Road Transport Workers (NURTW) employs street gangs called Agberos to collect its dues. During elections, the Agberos are dispatched to intimidate and coerce candidates and voters of opposing parties to their Big Man to facilitate his electoral victory in return for private gains, job security and impunity. Irrespective of variations in actors and contexts in the examples presented above, these gangs share a similar intention to affect the process and results of elections on behalf of the political elite in return for access to resources.

The other important contribution of this volume is that it highlights the peculiar and uneven distributions and patterns of geographies of electoral violence in Africa. The case of Bujumbura in Burundi shows that the areas that did not cast a majority vote for the incumbent leaders in the past elections or areas that are a stronghold of the opposition become the targets of extensive state reprisals. We can observe that these areas tend to have a large young population with low incomes and bleak prospects. On the other hand, areas that the incumbent came from, areas that voted for the incumbent in the past elections, areas that share the ethnic identity of the incumbent and areas of the well-to-do population and minorities are relatively unaffected by government-sponsored election-related violence. The case of the Kono district in Sierra Leone highlights another dimension: when a close race is expected, a swing area that determines national elections become the epicenter of electoral violence. Similarly, when an intense electoral race is expected, electoral violence is higher in areas with underlying land-related conflicts as evidenced by the case study about the Côte d'Ivoire's far west region.

Finally, the editors identify five recommendations to reduce electoral violence in Africa. First, the stakes in elections should be lowered through decentralization and redistribution of political and economic resources, and “political losers” (p. 259) must have a role and access to state resources. Secondly, other aspects of the democratization process like respect for the rule of law and independence of civil society need to be supported. Thirdly, the “concept of and practice of election observation and monitoring” need to be expanded to include electoral violence that

occurs on an everyday basis, “in-between general elections” and “within political parties” (p. 260). Fourthly, since the incumbents are the main perpetrators of electoral violence, security measures invoked in the name of election need to be scrutinized. Finally, unresolved local grievances like land-related disputes need to be addressed.

One problem with these policy recommendations is that they are not addressed to African agents who are both directly affected by electoral violence and better placed to understand and solve the problem sustainably. On the contrary, the recommendations are addressed to international actors that are engaged in election monitoring, assistance and support in Africa. For instance, the editors advise international organizations that work on election monitoring to devote time and resource to the “period between general elections” and “to domestic election observation” (p. 260). The editors also advise “international actors involved in electoral assistance and support” to be aware of the securitization of the electoral process by incumbents and to “ensure that civil liberties and rights are not circumvented too easily under the guise of security measures” (p. 261). These recommendations could have better principally been addressed to the African voters, political elites, and Pan-African institutions like the African Union. Then, the recommendations could have simultaneously or subsequently been addressed to the international actors that support African actors to solve the problems related to electoral violence.

In conclusion, the volume provides a comprehensive account of election-related violence in Africa through a combination of micro and macro-level case-studies. Students of electoral violence, conflict studies and democracy benefit significantly by reading this volume that effectively addresses how the institutionalization of multiparty elections and Big Man politics work hand-in-hand to produce electoral violence. Finally, for policymakers, practitioners and those who want to understand the processes, factors and actors that give rise to election-related violence in Africa, this book is informative and engaging.