

BOOK REVIEW

The moral economy of elections in Africa. Democracy, voting and virtue, by Nic Cheeseman, Gabrielle Lynch and Justin Willis, Cambridge UK, Cambridge University Press, 2020, 359 pp., £24.99 (paperback), ISBN 9781108404723

The third wave of democratization began in the mid-1970s in Southern Europe. Over time it spread to other regions, including Sub-Saharan Africa. Demand for democracy in the latter region came both from domestic civil societies and international actors, such as the government of the USA and the European Union. Many African countries underwent processes of democratization through which popularly elected governments replaced various species of authoritarians, both military and civilian.

Cheeseman, Lynch and Willis examine the democratization processes in three former British colonies in Sub-Saharan Africa: Ghana, Kenya and Uganda. The key question they examine is: “Do elections turn people into democratic citizens” (back cover blurb). It was axiomatic in the 1990s – the global high-water mark of democratization – that free-and-fair elections were a sine qua non to galvanize both democracy and development in Africa. The authors ask if repeated engagement with and participation in relatively free-and-fair elections turned Ghanaians, Kenyans and Ugandans into democrats?

The book starts with a lengthy introductory chapter, followed by seven further chapters. The first chapter is on the “moral economy of elections in Africa”. Chapter 2 examines the histories of elections in Ghana, Kenya, and Uganda from the colonial era until 2016/17, when the data for the book largely end. Chapter 3 focuses on how states and citizens are created via elections; Chapter 4 examines the impact of international encouragement to hold free-and-fair elections; and Chapter 5 is interested in the role of civil society in “creating democrats”. Chapters 3–5 comprise the book’s first part.

Part two is made up of two chapters. Chapter 6 examines how politicians in Ghana, Kenya and Uganda seek to project themselves as “virtuous” to their electorates to try to win their votes. Chapter 7 looks at what voters want from politicians and why they vote for them (or not). A concluding chapter sums up the book’s findings.

Methodologically, the book relies on three main sources of information: (1) archive research in the three countries, complemented to a limited degree by diplomatic archives in the UK and USA, (2) “Interviews and field notes” in Ghana, Kenya and Uganda. More than 300 interviews were undertaken with various kinds of people in the three countries, mainly by the authors and their research assistants, and (3) “three nationally representative surveys ... one in each country” (304–307).

What are the findings? Cheeseman, Lynch and Willis examine the trajectory of democratization in Ghana, Kenya and Uganda via the concept of what the back cover of the book labels the “radical new lens” of “the moral economy of elections”. They argue, to my mind persuasively, that in the three African countries elections – both presidential and parliamentary – are significantly shaped by competing visions of what it means to be a good leader, bureaucrat, or citizen. Their new lens reveals that in the three countries, elections are the site of concentrated moral contention. Two issues are important: (1) elections as the place where national issues are focused on, especially that of socio-economic development and who gets it and who does not; and (2) elections as a way for communities to vote for those who they think will do best for their community, developmentally-speaking. It turns out that while most voters value democracy as the chance to throw the bad guys out every 4–5 years, they may be even more keen to see elections as an opportunity to get something for themselves, often to be measured in monetary terms or in the form of goods (T-shirts, bags, drinks, food, etc).

Cheeseman, Lynch and Willis make the important observation that it is not simply the case that the politician offering the biggest “bribe” to vote for him or her will get the support of the “average”

voter. The latter has to see the politician as someone with “virtue”, a person who “deserves” their electoral support because they are a “good” person who will do well for the community. Interestingly, this is not all about “ethnicity” or “tribalism”. African voters are often judged, by both external and domestic observers, to be swayed by the political appeal of those from the same “tribe”. But this, Cheeseman, Lynch and Willis demonstrate, is not always the case. Sure, some people vote for Politician X because she or he is from the same “tribe” or ethnic group; but, often they do not. What may sway them, the authors aver, is whether politicians are judged to be “good” people on whom they can rely on to do the best for their voters. Are they approachable, conscientious, and hard-working?

The book deserves to be read by anyone interested in democratization/democracy/ elections in Sub-Saharan Africa. The authors repeatedly note they are not claiming that their findings are valid for anywhere beyond the three countries. At the same time, they provide enough evidence from other states, both “developed” and “developing”, to lead us to believe that their findings have more general validity than the three countries alone.

In conclusion, to return to the original question: “Do elections turn people into democratic citizens”? In relation to the three countries, there is a short and a long answer. The short answer is “yes”: voters in Ghana, Kenya and Uganda value elections in order to be able to express their democratic preferences. The long answer is “no”: not entirely. This is because many voters express their desire that the nation should do well and prosper via democratic means, reflecting a national outlook. At the same time, they also want to see themselves, their families, kin, and local community prospering, with the rest of the nation secondary. In sum, this is a rigorously-researched, thought-provoking, and very important book that will take our knowledge of elections and democracy in Africa to a new level of understanding.

Jeffrey Haynes

London Metropolitan University

Tsjhayn1@londonmet.ac.uk

<http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8434-6951>

© 2021 Jeffrey Haynes

<https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2021.1959550>