

BOOK REVIEW

Jerry John Rawlings. Leadership and Legacy: A Pan-African Perspective, edited by Felix Kumah-Abiwu and Sabella Ogbobode Abidde, Cham, Switzerland, Springer Nature Switzerland AG, 2022, 352 pp., £109.99 (hardback), index, ISBN 978-3-031-14666-4

Flight-Lieutenant Jerry John Rawlings was one of Africa's most controversial and polarising leaders. He began his political career in the late 1970s as a fiery revolutionary and ended it more than three decades later as a popularly elected president, winning two terms in office via a liberal democratic political system.

Rawlings briefly took over in Ghana in May 1979 following an armed forces mutiny, returning to power via a military coup d'état in December 1981. He stayed there for the next two decades: initially as unelected head of a joint civilian-military regime and later as popularly elected president. Rawlings claimed he wanted radically to reorganize Ghana's political system via a popular revolution. The first sub-Saharan African country to gain independence from Britain in 1957, Ghana had endured two decades of political and economic volatility and disappointment before Rawlings took over. Before his regime, unelected military regimes had followed short-lived, civilian-elected governments. The economy tanked. Ghanaians pilloried elected politicians for their corruption.

Rawlings grabbed power determined to change things. Yet, he found that the political system was difficult or impossible to restructure in the way he wanted. Despite attempts to bring the mass of ordinary Ghanaians into the country's decision-making process, his regime remained heavily dependent on military support. It turned out that most Ghanaians preferred the devil they knew – flawed liberal democracy – then a Rawlings-initiated revolution. Rawlings saw the writing on the wall and moved ideologically from being a self-proclaimed revolutionary to a democracy-supporting politician adept at winning elections. Rawlings was Ghana's popularly elected president for eight years (1993–2001). He stood down after two terms as the 1992 constitution demanded. Despite winning and retaining power via a multi-party liberal democratic system, Rawlings continued to believe that liberal democracy was inappropriate for Ghana, given its level of political and economic development. Until his death, he regularly condemned Ghana's high level of corruption among elected politicians and a self-serving political system that mainly seemed to benefit those in power and their 'fat cat' friends and supporters. Rawlings died – apparently of Covid-19 – in November 2020. Given that he was a central political figure in Ghana for more than three decades, it is surprising that so little has been written about him – beyond a few hagiographies and sometimes scurrilous memoirs by often-embittered former colleagues. The situation is addressed in this comprehensive and thoughtful overview of Rawlings' policies and programmes during his decades in power. The editors gathered experts and – as far as possible with such a controversial and polarising figure as Rawlings – objective contributors to comprise the 20 chapters of the book (plus the editors' introduction).

The book is in three sections: 'Governance and Leadership in Africa', 'Jerry John Rawlings and Ghana's Political Landscape', and 'A Pan-African Perspective of Jerry Rawlings'. One of the purposes of the book, according to the editors, is to examine Rawlings and his political legacy not only in Ghana but from a 'pan-African perspective'. The editors and several of the contributors note that Rawlings was widely regarded as a notable leader across much of Africa, partly because of his political achievements – he presided over a return to multi-party democracy in Ghana after an interregnum of 10 years – and partly because he introduced and implemented an effective yet unpopular 'economic recovery programme' resulting in

Ghana becoming an economic 'success story', unlike many of the country's regional counterparts.

The first section of the book comprises five chapters, covering various topics, including assessments of Rawlings as a national leader, his transformation from coup maker to democrat, and the role of the military in Ghana's politics over time. The second section of the book is made up of 10 chapters and considers Rawlings and his policies in Ghana over time, during both non-democratic and democratic periods in power. Chapter themes include public policy, social development, public administration, women's empowerment, civil society, democratization, and foreign policy. There is some content overlap in several of the chapters but overall the section is a relatively objective and comprehensive assessment of Rawlings' political impact on Ghana over time. The volume's third section contains five chapters.

Themes include Rawlings' role as an African Union 'trouble-shooter', seeking (unsuccessfully) to end, among others, the long-running civil conflict in Somalia. The section features an interesting chapter on Rawlings' championing of 'heritage tourism', a lucrative development, as people from all over the world came to visit Ghana's former slave forts, where captives were incarcerated before being shipped to the Americas. Further chapters cover a comparison of Ghana and Zambia's 'economic recovery programmes', 'Pan-African women empowerment', and 'Pan-Africanism and the African diaspora'.

In mid-2022, Ghana experienced significant anti-government demonstrations in the capital, Accra. The protests were organized by a new movement, 'Arise Ghana' (#AriseGhanaProtest). Arise Ghana was protesting against worsening economic conditions – inflation was running at 37% and a third of people under 30 were unemployed – as well as new taxes. Many Ghanaians would agree that Rawlings' values and legacy – that is, social justice, equality, and probity – are now comprehensively absent in Ghana. Similar circumstances which led to Arise Ghana were present when Rawlings and his comrades mutinied in May 1979. It remains to be seen if history will repeat itself and Ghana will again find itself embroiled in prolonged social, political, and economic turmoil because of governmental failings. The likelihood, however, seems small – not least because there is no sign of a charismatic and controversial figure such as Rawlings to lead and focus protests. Anybody wishing to understand the Rawlings 'phenomenon' would do well to start with this book.

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